

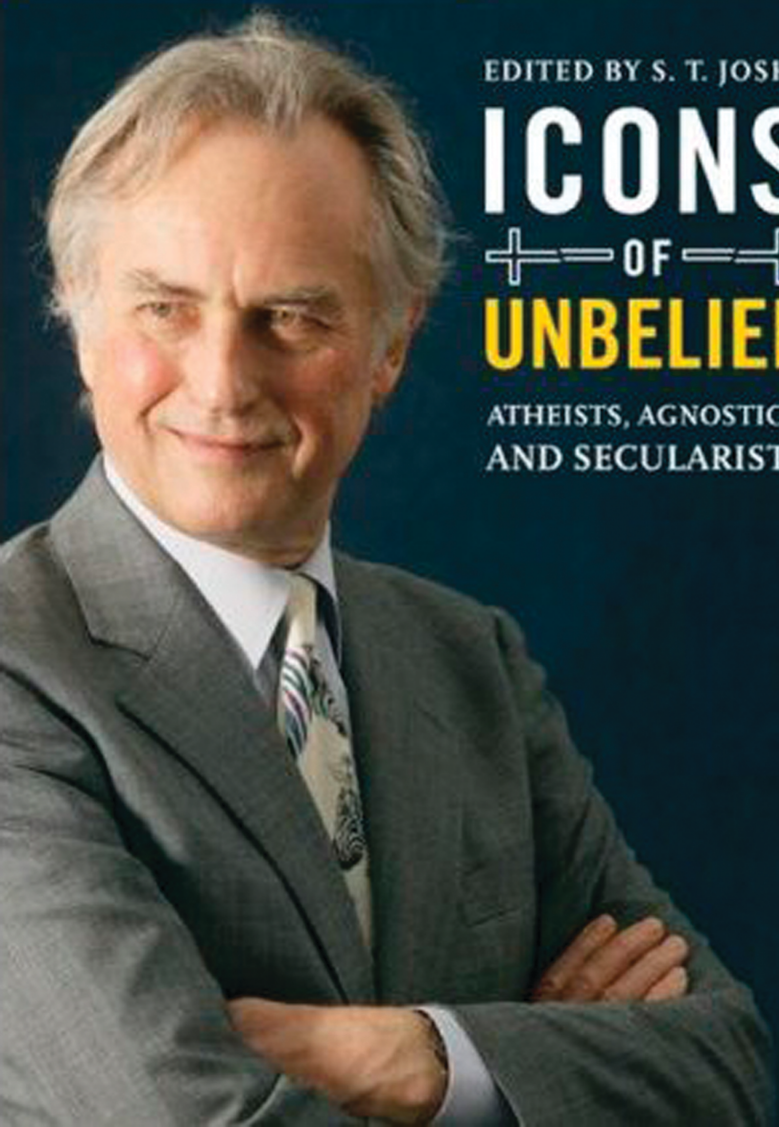


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Series Foreword

Worshipped and cursed. Loved and loathed. Obsessed about the world over. What does it take to become an icon? Regardless of subject, culture, or era, the requisite qualifications are the same: (1) challenge the status quo, (2) influence millions, and (3) impact history.

Using these criteria, Greenwood Press introduces a new reference format and approach to popular culture. Spanning a wide range of subjects, volumes in the Greenwood Icons series provide students and general readers a port of entry into the most fascinating and influential topics of the day. Every title offers an in-depth look at approximately 24 iconic figures, each of which captures the essence of a broad subject. These icons typically embody a group of values, elicit strong reactions, reflect the essence of a particular time and place, and link different traditions and periods. Among those featured are artists and activists, superheroes and spies, inventors and athletes, the legends and mythmakers of entire generations. Yet icons can also come from unexpected places: the heroine who transcends the pages of a novel or the revolutionary idea that shatters our previously held beliefs. Whether people, places, or things, such icons serve as a bridge between the past and the present, the canonical and the contemporary. By focusing on icons central to popular culture, this series encourages students to appreciate cultural diversity and critically analyze issues of enduring significance.

Most important, these books are as entertaining as they are provocative. Is Disneyland a more influential icon of the American West than Las Vegas? How do ghosts and ghouls reflect our collective psyche? Is Barry Bonds an inspiring or deplorable icon of baseball?

Designed to foster debate, the series serves as a unique resource that is ideal for paper writing or report purposes. Insightful, in-depth entries provide far more information than conventional reference articles but are less intimidating and more accessible than a book-length biography. The most revered and reviled icons of American and world history are brought to life with related

sidebars, timelines, fact boxes, and quotations. Authoritative entries are accompanied by bibliographies, making these titles an ideal starting point for further research. Spanning a wide range of popular topics including business, literature, civil rights, politics, music, and more, books in the series provide fresh insights for the student and popular reader into the power and influence of icons, a topic of as vital interest today as in any previous era.

Preface

Icons of Unbelief seeks to provide insight into some of the most significant atheists, agnostics, and secularists in Western civilization during the past three centuries. The subject of atheism has attracted considerable interest in recent years as a result of best-selling books by Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens; but many of the arguments made in their books draw upon philosophical, religious, political, and historical arguments made by atheists and agnostics reaching back to classical antiquity. For a number of reasons, it can be said that atheism achieved full coherence as a viable philosophical outlook in the course of the past three centuries, first with the work of the French *philosophes* (whose influence on the Founding Fathers was profound), and especially with the advance of scientific knowledge in the nineteenth century, culminating in Darwin's theory of evolution. Evolution, in the eyes of many thinkers, provided the final piece of the puzzle (in its refutation of the argument from design, one of the last remaining arguments supporting the existence of a deity) for a purely secular outlook—and it is no doubt for this reason that Darwin and his theory remain profoundly controversial.

The selection of the twenty-seven subjects included in this book was a difficult one, and I decided that this volume would be of greatest service to readers if it covered a wide range of intellectuals, ranging from pure philosophers (John Dewey, John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell) to scientists (Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, Albert Einstein), political figures (Charles Bradlaugh, the Founding Fathers), journalists and other publicists (Sam Harris, Robert G. Ingersoll, H. L. Mencken), and even creative writers (H. P. Lovecraft, Mark Twain, Gore Vidal), all of whom have contributed to the advocacy of atheism, agnosticism, or secularism or have presented arguments against the central tenets of religion, from metaphysical, ethical, political, or other perspectives. The great majority of these thinkers were chiefly devoted to battling Christianity because they had emerged from a Christian culture; one recent thinker, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, has expressed her rejection of her native Islamic upbringing.

It should not be assumed that all, or even many, of the thinkers discussed in this book can be labeled full-fledged atheists; it will become evident from the essays that a number of them could be called either agnostics or largely anti-clerical, a few of them even expressing a tentative inclination toward some kind of theism, albeit usually of an unorthodox or nondoctrinal nature. It should similarly not be assumed that the authors selected to write about these thinkers are themselves atheists, agnostics, or secularists, or that they have written their essays for the purpose of advocating atheism or agnosticism or of disparaging religion in general or any given religion in particular. The authors of these essays were chosen because of their expertise in the given subject, not because they adhere to any religious or nonreligious orthodoxy. The essays are meant to be largely objective, nontendentious discussions of the religious views of the thinkers in question.

The essays focus largely on the philosophical and religious thought of their subjects; biographical information has, in most instances, been kept to a minimum, largely out of space considerations. In a few instances (e.g., Ali, Voltaire), the lives of the authors are of particular interest or of particular relevance in the assessment of their religious views, so that in these cases the relative amount of biographical information has been increased.

Each essay contains both a primary and a secondary bibliography. In no case should these bibliographies be regarded as complete; some of the thinkers in question have written immense amounts of work, and some have attracted voluminous commentary over the decades and centuries. The bibliographies, for the most part, include only the works actually cited in the essays, with some additional citations of important primary or secondary works. Each essay also contains two or more sidebars providing interesting anecdotes about the subjects' relations to religion, quotations from their work, or other material.

It is hoped that a volume of this sort will contribute to our society's ongoing discussion regarding the place of religion—and of atheism, agnosticism, and secularism—in our personal, social, and political life. Too often, such discussions become overheated and hostile—perhaps understandably so, given the importance of the issue in the outlooks of many individuals. But discussions of this sort must rest upon sound facts and evidence, which this book hopes to provide. It was, relatively speaking, not so long ago that a frank discussion of atheism would have been considered a criminal offense; and to the degree that religion's entanglement with politics and the law has been reduced to allow for such an open examination of this subject, a genuine social and intellectual advance has occurred. There is no likelihood that religion will somehow disappear from the social or political sphere, but it is now also unlikely that advocates of atheism or agnosticism will cease to press their case. Insofar, then, as this debate is destined to be perennial, the relevance of a volume of this sort may also be perennial.

—S. T. Joshi

Ayaan Hirsi Ali

Jenin Younes

In late 2004, a Dutch filmmaker named Theo Van Gogh was shot to death in broad daylight in the streets of Amsterdam. Afterward, the murderer, later identified as Islamist Muhammad Bouyeri, cut Van Gogh's throat, nearly decapitating him. Before fleeing the scene, Bouyeri stabbed a five-page note through his victim's chest—a death threat to a Somalian-born member of the Dutch Parliament, Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

Earlier that year, Ali and Van Gogh had produced a short film entitled *Submission, Part I*. The film depicts four Muslim women, oppressed and abused in the name of Islam. While both Ali and Van Gogh knew the film would provoke negative reactions from the Muslim community, according to Ali neither seriously expected to be physically harmed, let alone killed. Van Gogh's violent death cast Ali into the international public sphere, where her controversial opinions on religion, Islam, and Muslim cultural practices have become familiar not only in the Netherlands but in the rest of Europe and the United States.

Ali was born on November 13, 1969, in Mogadishu, Somalia. Her father spent her early life in and out of jail as a result of his opposition to Somalia's Soviet-backed dictator. She was raised primarily by her mother, the daughter of desert nomads whose technology did not exceed that of the Iron Age, and who believed that Allah's djinn (spirits) regularly interfered with the workings of the natural world. In her youth, Ali's mother had been a strong-willed, autonomous woman. She had divorced a husband her family had forced her to marry and ventured out on her own. By the time Ali was a child, however, cultural pressure and marital difficulties had crushed her mother's independent spirit and left her a bitter, tortured woman. She had surrendered all hope for happiness in this life, believing that she would be rewarded for her earthly suffering in the hereafter. Throughout Ali's childhood and adolescence,

her mother served as a constant reminder to her that she must find a way to escape the fate of the typical Somali woman.

Ali's mother took her anger out on her children, and on Ali in particular. Ali describes almost daily beatings for years of her childhood, in which her mother tied her hands behind her back and thrashed her with wire. At the age of five, Ali's grandmother, against her absent father's wishes, had Ali, her younger sister, and her brother undergo ritual circumcision, which for a girl involves cutting out the inner labia and clitoris. The pain was intense not only during but for days following the procedure, and Ali writes of her sister: "Haweya was never the same afterward. . . . She had horrible nightmares" (*Infidel*, 33).

During most of her childhood and adolescence, Ali's family moved around according to her father's wishes. They spent time in Saudi Arabia, Kenya, and Somalia. While in Kenya, at around the age of sixteen, Ali fervently embraced Islam, attending prayer groups and reading the writings of such Islamists as Sayyid Qutb. While few women wore the head scarf in Kenya, Ali chose to adopt it in order to prove her commitment to Islam. In addition, she donned a huge black cloak that covered her entire body. The outfit, she writes, made her feel pure and superior to her peers: "It made me feel powerful. . . . Weirdly, it made me feel like an individual. It sent out a message of superiority: I was the one true Muslim. All those other girls with their little white headscarves were children, hypocrites" (*Infidel*, 85).

"I am told that *Submission* is too aggressive a film. Its criticism of Islam is apparently too painful for Muslims to bear. Tell me, how much more painful is it to be these women, trapped in that cage?"

—Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*, 350

Yet, at the same time, Ali was drawn to Western romance novels, including authors like Danielle Steel. Through these books, Ali caught a glimpse of a world where marriage was based on love, women chose their sexual partners, and men and women were equals. When her father appeared after many years' absence in 1992, announcing that he had found her a pious Somali husband, Ali decided she could not comply. She refused to attend the wedding ceremony, which was carried on without her, and instead of flying to Canada to meet her new husband, she fled to the Netherlands. Because she could not attain refugee status in Holland on the basis of a forced marriage, she fabricated a claim that her life was in danger due to the Somali civil war.

At first, she worked as a cleaning woman but soon became a translator, since she was fluent in English and had quickly become well-versed in Dutch. In 1997, she became a Dutch citizen. During this time, she took classes at the University of Leiden, majoring in political science. She graduated in 2000 and

took a position as a junior researcher for the Dutch Labor Party's think tank. After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, Ali began to speak out against Islam, in particular the oppression of Muslim women not only in Muslim countries, but among Muslim immigrants in the West. She received countless threats from Muslims, and since the beginning of her public denouncement of Islam has required round-the-clock protection from bodyguards.

In 2003, Ali was elected to the Dutch parliament as a member of the Liberal Party, having become disillusioned with the Labor Party's failure to criticize Islam and the treatment of Muslim women in the Netherlands out of "respect" for Muslim beliefs and cultural practices (*Infidel*, 294). After the murder of Theo Van Gogh and the death threats from Muslim extremists, Ali's personal security intensified. In 2006, when her Dutch citizenship was nearly revoked as a result of the discovery of her fraudulent asylum plea, Ali accepted a position working for the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank in the United States. In America, where she continues to write and speak out against Islam, she is safer than in the Netherlands. In late 2007, Ali considered returning to Holland when the Dutch government refused to pay for her personal security outside of the country. With the help of Sam Harris and other supporters, Ali is currently raising money for bodyguards, who cost far more than "anything a private person could raise" ("Islam Critic," 3).

Ali's transition from Islam to atheism began immediately upon her arrival in the West. The moment she stepped off the plane, she noticed how clean the streets were and how smoothly everything functioned, from timely public transportation to garbage collection to the police, who, instead of demanding bribes, assisted anyone in need.

Everything was so well kept. The grooves between the cobbles on the street were clean. The shopfronts gleamed. I remember thinking, "This is amazing, how can it be so?" I was used to heaps of stinking rubbish and streets pockmarked with huge potholes where the dirt comes at you and nothing ever stays clean. In Nairobi, except for a few wealthy enclaves, . . . people live on top of each other, in slum houses made of bare cinder block or cardboard and metal sheets. There are beggars and bag snatchers and orphans living on rubbish heaps. (*Infidel*, 185)

If the infidels were so misguided, she wondered, and the Muslims were on the right path, why does everything work so well in the West while in Muslim countries everything is chaos? As time passed, Ali began to test the "truths" she had been told since childhood. She walked outside without a head scarf and found that Allah did not strike her dead. She then began to wear pants, drink alcohol, and date a Dutch man, and she discovered that not only did Allah fail to punish her, but life was better than ever.

The pleasure she derived from wearing Western clothes and living a Western lifestyle was nothing compared to reading the works of thinkers like

John Stuart Mill, Spinoza, Freud, Durkheim, and Darwin. Gradually, Ali realized the importance of a secular government in preserving the rights of the individual and the importance of individual rights to a healthy, well-functioning society where government existed to serve the needs of the people, instead of the other way around. "Society worked without reference to God, and it seemed to function perfectly. This man-made system of government was so much more stable, peaceful, prosperous and happy than the supposedly God-devised systems I had been taught to respect" (*Infidel*, 240).

Not until September 11, though, did Ali identify herself as an atheist. Although her commitment to Islam had waned over the years in the West, she had not admitted to herself that she had lost faith in God. After September 11, Ali picked up the Quran and found the verses quoted by Osama bin Laden glaring back at her. If the verses he had quoted to justify mass murder appeared in the Quran, how could his mission be a perversion of Islam, as so many claimed? A few months later, she read *The Atheist Manifesto* and realized she no longer believed in God. "I thought: an atheist manifesto is a declaration of the devil. I could feel an inner resistance. But recently I felt ready. The time had come. I saw that God was an invention and that subjection to His will meant nothing more than subjecting yourself to the willpower of the strongest" (*Caged Virgin*, 76).

Ali does not actively oppose religion in general. Christianity and Judaism in particular, she believes, have been "opened up" by Enlightenment thought and in their current forms are compatible with separation of church and state (Hari, 39). Ali resists religion when it intervenes in government and requires the subjugation of any group of people based on ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. "I have nothing against religion as a source of comfort. Rituals and prayer can provide support, and I am not asking anyone to give those up. But I do reject religion as a moral gauge, a guideline for life. And this applies above all to Islam, which is an all-pervasive religion, dominating every step of your life" (*Caged Virgin*, 76). Islam, Ali argues, is not viewed by its practitioners as a tool to enhance life but rather is considered the essence of life.

"The only position that leaves me with no cognitive dissonance is atheism. It is not a creed. Death is certain, replacing both the siren-song of Paradise and the dread of Hell. Life on this earth, with all its mystery and beauty and pain, is then to be lived far more intensely: we stumble and get up, we are sad, confident, insecure, feel loneliness and joy and live. There is nothing more; I want nothing more."

—Ayaan Hirsi Ali, "How (and Why) I Became an Infidel," 480

Thus Ali's criticism of religion focuses almost exclusively on Islam. She has taken a particular interest in ensuring that Muslim women and girls in the

West are afforded the same opportunities and given the same protection under the law as any other citizen. Although Ali admires most aspects of Western culture, she has no patience for multiculturalism: the belief that all cultures are equally good and worthy of respect, that one culture cannot judge the practices of another culture because morality is relative, and therefore that a free society must allow all cultural and religious practices even if they violate individual rights.

According to Ali, this mistaken view has led European, Canadian, and American officials to overlook and allow the domestic abuse, honor killing, and genital mutilation of Muslim girls. These are not merely *different* ways of living, Ali contends; they are *worse*, not only for women but also for men. Muslim men and women who inflict these abuses on their wives, sisters, and daughters must be subject to the same laws as anyone else who kills, beats, or maims another human being. In Ali's words, "Westerners should hold Arabs and Muslims to the same high moral standards as Westerners hold for themselves" (*Caged Virgin*, 35).

Some critics have noted that Ali's views about the ultimate solution to these problems are somewhat contradictory. At times, she insists that Islam cannot be reformed but must be defeated. Islam is an inherently violent and sexist religion, based upon the example of the Prophet Muhammad, who had sex with a nine-year-old, sanctioned wife beating, and ordered the killing of Jews, apostates, and homosexuals. Islam's obsession with female virginity justifies honor killings, female circumcision, and the imprisonment of women within their own homes. Islam is fundamentally incompatible with secular government, and thus the situation for Muslim women (and men) will improve only with the extinction of Islam. Because Islam is intrinsically violent, as long as Islam exists the Western world will never be free from the threat of Muslim terrorism. Thus the war on terror is really a "war on Islam" (Hari, 38).

In other instances, Ali contends that Islam can, and should, be reformed:

It's wrong to treat Muslims as if they will never find their John Stuart Mill. Christianity and Judaism show that people can be very dogmatic and then open up. There is a minority [within Islam] like [the reformists] Irshad Manji and Tawfiq Hamid who want to remain in the faith and reform it. Can you be a Muslim and respect the separation of church and state? I hope a large enough number of Muslims will agree you can, and they will find a way to keep the spiritual elements that comfort them and live in a secular society. (Hari, 39)

Some critics—for example, Johann Hari—have attributed these seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints to "cognitive dissonance." While Ali abhors Islam, she has seen Muslims who are tolerant and moderate and thus has difficulty maintaining, even in her own mind, that Islam necessarily leads to violence, misogyny, and intolerance (Hari, 41–43).

Ali has received a largely favorable response to her books and other writings. Christopher Hitchens writes of *Infidel* that the book “shows that a determined woman can change more history than her own” (Hitchens, “A Voice That Will Not Be Silenced”). A reviewer for the *Washington Post* writes that Ali’s book tells an “extraordinary story” and that Ali herself is a “unique writer” who “deserve[s] to go far” (Applebaum, 5). Another reviewer, from the *Observer*, writes that fundamentally Ali is “a passionate believer in human rights,” a person who believes in the equality of women, regardless of cultural and religious background (Anthony, 4).

Ali’s staunch, unflinching criticism of Islam has provoked numerous negative reactions. She is frequently accused of categorizing all Muslims as fundamentalists. A reviewer from the *Observer* writes that “in voicing her opinion in the style she does, she risks lumping together over a billion people from different nations, cultures and traditions as a single ‘problem’” (Anthony, 4). Ali has replied that naturally she realizes that many strains of Islam exist, and that not all Muslims supported the terrorist attacks of 9/11 or the murder of Van Gogh. On the other hand, no vocal moderate population exists within the Muslim community. Ali asks why no moderate Muslims protested when a Saudi Arabian girl was gang-raped in 2007 and then sentenced to two hundred lashes for associating with a man who was not a relative. Why did no Muslim moderates speak out when a British woman was prosecuted in Sudan for allowing schoolchildren to name a teddy bear Muhammad? If not all Muslims are fundamentalists, and if some believe compassion toward other human beings and respect for individual rights override blind obedience to Quranic law, she writes, then let them speak out. If not, some generalizations about Muslims are justified.

According to other critics, Ali’s failure to distinguish between different types of Muslims is not only a theoretical problem, but also a tactical one. Ian Buruma claims that her “absolutist view of a perfectly enlightened West at war with the demonic world of Islam” is unlikely to win the struggle against radical Islam (Buruma, “Submission”). Similarly, Timothy Garton Ash, who has called Ali an “Enlightenment Fundamentalist” (although he has since retracted this term and apologized for using it), argues that her approach does not inspire Muslims to integrate reason into their faith. “A policy based on the expectation that millions of Muslims will so suddenly abandon the faith of their fathers and mothers is simply not realistic. . . . For secular Europeans to demand that Muslims adopt their faith—secular humanism—would be almost as intolerant as the Islamist jihadist demand that we should adopt theirs” (Garton Ash, “Islam”). According to Garton Ash, we must instead persuade Muslims that their religion and culture are compatible with liberal democracy.

Ali has responded to the charge of “Enlightenment Fundamentalism,” saying that while Garton Ash may see the Enlightenment as complex, to her it is simple. This is not to suggest that she sees the Enlightenment as a monolithic

"Ali's sister, Haweya, joined Ali in Holland in 1994. Soon after, confronted with freedom she did not know how to deal with, she became depressed and began to adopt the head scarf and practice Islam fervently, which she had never done before. Depression turned into psychosis, and after spending time in a mental institution, Haweya returned to Kenya. She underwent several exorcisms to cast out the devil. She soon stopped eating and died in 1998 of starvation and fatigue. Haweya's tragic failure to assimilate into Western culture, or to accept her fate as a Muslim woman, taught her sister a cruel lesson: Not all Muslim women, when given the opportunity, are able to break the bonds their culture has placed on them."

—Buruma, *Murder* 163–164

movement, but rather that she embraces wholeheartedly the underlying principles of the Enlightenment—the rights of the individual, the rule of law, and freedom of expression—and she does not believe we should compromise these values for Muslims or anyone else. Furthermore, she does not expect Muslims to abandon their faith overnight; she sees herself at the beginning of a critical movement against Islam that may take generations.

Garton Ash, Buruma, and others maintain that Ali's attack on Islam alienates the very people she is trying to help. Muslim writer Lorraine Ali claims that Ali's autobiography is a manipulative piece of work written to serve her political agenda. She writes that Ali speaks more to Islamophobes than to Islamic women. "That's problematic considering she describes herself in *Infidel* as a woman who 'fights for the rights of Muslim women, the enlightenment of Islam and the security of the West.' How can you change the lives of your former sisters, and work toward reform, when you've forged a career upon renouncing the religion and insulting its followers?" (Lorraine Ali, 38).

In response to these accusations, Ali has argued that while Muslims may feel hurt or offended by her criticisms of Islam, the attitude of multiculturalists and moral relativists is far more offensive. These people treat all Muslims like children who are not equal discussion partners and who are incapable of engaging in a civil, rational debate about their religion. While some, like Buruma and Garton Ash, contend that she should use a less harsh approach, Van Gogh's murder has reinforced her belief in her methods. "Since Theo Van Gogh's death, I have been convinced more than ever that I must say it in *my* way only and have *my* criticism" (*Caged Virgin*, xviii).

Ali's uncompromising criticism of Islam has led both Westerners and Muslims to embrace or dismiss her views. Yet even her critics cannot help but admire her courage, determination, and personal strength. For proponents of rationality around the world, Ali is a hero who, against the odds, resisted the role of wife, mother, and housekeeper forced upon her by her religion and

culture and created her own life. For these atheists, agnostics, and unbelievers, Ali's life epitomizes the superiority of Western Enlightenment thought to religious ideology and reveals the overwhelmingly negative effects fundamentalist religion has on the life of the individual. Her personal journey from a world steeped in faith to the world of reason has convinced them that the battle against religion, especially fundamentalism, can and must be won.

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Charles Bradlaugh

David Tribe

Charles Bradlaugh (1833–1891) was, despite little formal education, the foremost nineteenth-century unbeliever in the British Empire. In the United States his fame (or notoriety) was eclipsed only by that of Robert G. Ingersoll and Clarence Darrow.

As a footnote to general English history, he is remembered more for his political and legal struggles and his advocacy, with Annie Besant, of birth control than for his explicitly irreligious views. His numerous publications have long been out of print, and even in his own day his most famous work was a republican *Impeachment of the House of Brunswick*. Yet everything he did, said, and wrote could be traced back to an abiding opposition to religion as an ideology he considered not only untrue but the major impediment to mental freedom, civil liberties, and law reform.

Saying that he did not “deny God” he would today be labeled by scholars as a “negative” atheist, in that he believed we cannot prove there is a God, by contrast with “positive” atheists, who believe we can prove there is no God. But in the popular sense of the word he was conspicuously “positive.” Unlike many of his atheist colleagues, except in his early years he was not obsessed with the “mistakes” of Moses and the “crimes” of Christianity, and he always expounded a progressive humanist message.

While consistently anticlerical, as a secular humanist he judged people as he found them and enjoyed friendly relations with many fair-minded clerics. These included Moncure D. Conway of liberal South Place Chapel, Unitarian James Applebee, Congregationalist Frederic Aveling, and especially Anglican Stewart Headlam. In a “reminiscence” of Bradlaugh in *Cosmos Magazine* on April 30, 1895, Ernest Besant-Scott reported that when Bradlaugh met with kindness from Christians who said “they were acting in the true spirit of Christ,” he confessed, “When I meet with conduct of that kind it often makes

me wonder whether my speculative views must be a mistake or no" (430). This reaction belied his fearsome public image.

BIOGRAPHICAL OUTLINE

Described by Annie Besant as "a young eagle in a barn fowl's nest" ("Charles Bradlaugh"), Bradlaugh was born on September 26, 1833, in London's impoverished East End to a poor solicitor's confidential clerk and a former nursemaid. As the eldest of seven children, some of them sickly, he had a strong sense of responsibility and a tendency to be "bossy." He was educated in the "four Rs" (reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion) at a brutal British (Quaker) school and two private schools till the age of eleven. At the local Anglican Sunday school he became a teacher.

For a confirmation visitation by the bishop of London, his pastor, the Reverend J. G. Packer, asked him to study the Thirty-nine Articles of the Anglican faith. Conscientiously, he extended his study to their biblical source and found discrepancies, which he asked Packer to explain. Denounced for atheism, he was suspended from Sunday school and absented himself from church. Sundays were spent at an outdoor speaking site, where he met freethinking "utopian socialist" Owenites and Chartists and initially defended Christianity. They gave him Robert Taylor's deistic *Diegesis* of 1829, which he sent to Packer for comment. Instead, he was given three days to change his views or lose his home and job. Before the time was up, he left both.

Given refuge by his new friends, one of whom taught him Hebrew to facilitate his biblical studies, he was introduced to a well-known unbeliever, George Jacob Holyoake, who chaired Bradlaugh's first, unpublished lecture on "The Past, Present, and Future of Theology." Bradlaugh also wrote anti-Christian tracts, the first bylined one being *A Few Words on the Christians' Creed* (1850).

To earn a living he started businesses, which all failed through lack of capital and his infidel reputation. Because of his admiration of Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous 1841 essay "Self-Reliance," he declined charity, joined the army in 1850, and was sent to Ireland, where he saw how British imperialism and Roman Catholic tyranny crushed the masses. Reconciled with his parents and resentful of military drill and discipline, he was bought out of the army through a great-aunt's legacy in 1853.

During his absence from England, Holyoake had launched a new movement to replace Chartism and Owenism. "Secularism" was a reformist and ethical commitment to "this world" as the only one we know. Renouncing his past as an atheist, once imprisoned for blasphemy, Holyoake now wished to avoid theological confrontation. Bradlaugh joined the movement and also the office of a solicitor, who asked him to adopt a pseudonym for his secularist

propaganda. He chose “Iconoclast.” In 1855 he married the daughter of a freethinking republican and remained fond of her during her alcoholic binges and their 1870 separation, until her death in 1877.

Meanwhile, dissension had erupted in secularist circles. The causes were Holyoake’s adoption of respectability; his exclusion of rivals from his journal, the *Reasoner*; and his defrauding of colleagues in a “cooperative” venture that he controlled. Feeling obligated to the “father of secularism” (and of the cooperative movement), Bradlaugh remained neutral in this dispute till 1858, when he earned Holyoake’s undying enmity by vigorously joining the dissidents and replacing the older man as president of the London Secular Society. Following his editorship (1858–1859) of an unsuccessful *Investigator*, in 1860 he became coeditor of the *National Reformer*. In 1861 he became sole editor and in 1862 proprietor, when he proclaimed the journal the voice of atheism, republicanism, and (neo)Malthusianism (birth control). In 1866 all but four of Britain’s secular societies united to form the National Secular Society (NSS), with Bradlaugh as (executive) president.

Between 1853 and 1863 he worked for three solicitors and as an articled clerk for the last two, who also had business interests. His legal career came to an end, however, when one of the solicitors was imprisoned for debt and the other absconded to escape prosecution for fraud. Bradlaugh then set up in business for himself as a company secretary, insurance agent, and financier. For a time he prospered; but he was overtaken by an economic downturn combined with his frequent inability, as an atheist, to sue debtors because he could be refused permission to take an oath. Though his legal acumen and persistence achieved the right of unbelievers to affirm in law courts from 1869, it was too late to save his businesses from failure in 1870.

In December 1860 Bradlaugh began a freethought lecture in Devonport Park, near Plymouth. Police Superintendent Edwards intervened, saying the park was recreational only. Bradlaugh argued that temperance lectures occurred there—but, threatened with expulsion and uncertain of his rights, he withdrew. In March 1861 the local secularists hired a private field near the park and, in defiance of Edwards, Bradlaugh began, “Friends, I am about to address you on the Bible.” He was brutally arrested and imprisoned overnight. At a magistrate’s hearing he was charged with inciting a breach of the peace and assaulting Edwards, but the case was dismissed.

He avoided bankruptcy and eventually paid off his debts but abandoned his business career in favor of full-time freethought writing and lecturing. In 1868 he defied the “security laws,” which demanded costly bonds against seditious

or blasphemous libels in newspapers; and his legal and journalistic fight secured their repeal the following year.

Though a reformist Radical and not a revolutionary, Bradlaugh nevertheless assisted Continental refugee socialists and republicans. He supported Republican France in 1870 and was invited to act as an unofficial mediator in peace talks between the Paris Commune and the Versailles government in 1871. That year, stimulated by Continental events and British dissatisfaction with the Prince of Wales and Queen Victoria, an English republican movement emerged. The NSS was transformed into a network of republican clubs; and Bradlaugh became leader of the republican movement's secularist wing. During a lecture tour of America he was proclaimed by the *New York Herald* on September 18, 1873, "The Future President of England." Instead, the movement collapsed in 1874 and secularism resumed centrality in Bradlaugh's life.

At this time Annie Besant, the separated wife of an Anglican clergyman and an agonizing agnostic, was advised by Moncure Conway's wife to visit the NSS Hall of Science and listen to Bradlaugh, "the finest speaker of Saxon-English that I have ever heard, except, perhaps, John Bright, and his power over a crowd is something marvellous" (Besant, *Autobiography*, 134). First, Besant wrote to Bradlaugh with a query. He replied, "To be a member of the National Secular Society it is only necessary to be able honestly to accept the four principles, as given in the *National Reformer* of June 14th. This any person may do without being required to avow himself an Atheist. Candidly, we can see no logical resting-place between the entire acceptance of authority, as in the Roman Catholic Church, and the most extreme Rationalism" (Bradlaugh family papers).

Besant became not only an NSS member but within months a vice president, serving on key subcommittees consisting of herself and Bradlaugh. Besant's rapid advance upset other talented, long-serving lieutenants and led to much gossip. Indeed, she and Bradlaugh were emotionally attached to each other and, as private papers show, intended to marry eventually. Because of Bradlaugh's belief in the marriage vow "till death do us part," their marriage had to be delayed until after the death of both spouses. Though Mrs. Bradlaugh died in 1877, the Reverend Frank Besant lived to 1917, long after Bradlaugh's own death. Dissension in inner secularist circles came to a head, however, only when compounded by a birth control controversy.

In 1868 Bradlaugh had run for Parliament as a Radical Party candidate for the provincial borough of Northampton. The philosopher John Stuart Mill sent ten pounds toward his election expenses and, when this donation was discovered, lost his own seat at Westminster. Bradlaugh, too, was unsuccessful then and at two elections in 1874, but he succeeded in 1880. Before a member of Parliament could take his seat, he had to take the oath or—if he were a Quaker or "every other person for the time being permitted"—affirm.

Believing that, following his 1869 victory, this provision applied to him, Bradlaugh asked to affirm. A select committee was set up to investigate his right and decided that what applied in law courts did not apply in Parliament. He then expressed his willingness to take the oath, for he regarded the word *God* as meaningless, and another select committee was set up. This one decided that, as an atheist, he was ineligible to swear an oath but should be allowed to affirm. At first, the House of Commons rejected this recommendation but then allowed him to affirm “subject to any liability by statute” (fines for voting without swearing). He then faced a legal challenge, six years of self-conducted litigation, one night’s imprisonment (the last such victim), physical expulsion, another general election, and three by-elections before a new Speaker of the House allowed him to take his oath and seat in 1886.

Inside Parliament he proved himself a conscientious and valued member, sitting on four important select committees and a Royal Commission on Vaccination, and becoming known as “the member for India.” He advocated numerous political, legal, and social reforms, many of which were implemented in his lifetime or have been since, and practical measures like an English-French Channel Tunnel. His greatest individual triumph was the Oaths Act of 1888, allowing affirmation wherever an oath was required.

In his final years, as a Liberal Party member Bradlaugh was also engaged in opposing “scientific socialism” (Marxism), to which Besant and other prominent secularists defected, on the grounds that it promoted violent revolution and was likely to lead to tyranny, censorship, lack of enterprise, and economic stagnation. It is generally conceded that these prophecies have been amply vindicated since his death, which occurred on January 30, 1891.

ATTITUDE TO PHILOSOPHY

G. W. Foote, Bradlaugh’s successor as NSS president and founding editor of the *Freethinker*, observed of his predecessor in the *Freethinker* of February 22, 1891, “His mind was of the practical order, like Oliver Cromwell’s.” Indeed, Bradlaugh’s loyal disciple J. M. Robertson conceded he had “something of Cromwell’s Berserker temper” (Bonner and Robertson, 2.427). On another topic Stanton Coit, a pillar of Ethical Culture, said wistfully in the *Freethinker* of March 22, 1891, “He never stopped to speak words of sympathy for the destitute—he was always rushing to remedies.” Bradlaugh had, therefore, no reputation as a philosopher, or even as a student of philosophy. Mostly addressing large public audiences with no knowledge of the subject and legal or political courts or assemblies with no interest in it, he rarely spoke on philosophy. But to inform his addresses to the London Dialectical Society, of which he was a leading member from its inception in 1869, and his articles in nonfreethought publications, he had a good working knowledge of philosophy.

This knowledge came out in his 1860 definition of atheism in the *National Reformer* of December 29, 1860:

I do not deny “God” because that word conveys to me no idea, and I cannot deny that which presents to me no distinct affirmation, and of which the would-be affirmer has no conception. I cannot war with a nonentity. If, however, God is affirmed to represent an existence of which I am a mode, and which it is alleged is not the noumenon of which the word “I” represents only a speciality of phenomena, then I deny “God,” and affirm that it is impossible “God” can be.

Knowing how often philosophical discussions can get bogged down in semantics without reaching substantive conclusions, and how variant definitions would be nitpicked for signs of any ideological wavering, throughout his life he kept pretty much to this 1860 declaration.

In it Bradlaugh echoed one philosopher he admired and another he wrote a lot about in his *Freethinker's Text-Book*: the seventeenth-century Dutchman Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza and the eighteenth-century German Immanuel Kant. Bradlaugh sometimes called himself, after Spinoza, a “monist,” believing that there is only one kind of basic “stuff” in the world or, at any rate, that other kinds are unknown and unknowable. Monism is contrasted with dualism, a belief that there are two separate dominions, spiritual and material or mind and matter. Spinoza is best known as an exponent of pantheism, a theory that, because the scholastic definition of *substance* (an all-embracing, self-justifying, and eternal necessary existent) is the same as the theological definition of *God*, the two are identical. While pantheism is hard to disprove, it is mere wordplay, and there is no point in believing it apart from an environmental standpoint. Importantly for freethinkers, it rules out the possibility of God's intervening in the universe from outside it through miracles or revelations. In effect, this position is atheistic, and Spinoza has been generally regarded as an unbeliever careful not to use the dangerous term *atheism*. In his *Freethinker's Text-Book*, Bradlaugh approvingly quoted the Reverend Thomas Pearson's admission that “pantheism reaches the point to which it is ever tending—the very verge of Atheism” (99).

The noumenon and phenomena Bradlaugh spoke of in his declaration come from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Noumena are things-in-themselves, which would exist in whatever is their natural form without the presence of sentient beings, and phenomena are how sentient beings experience noumena. It was Kant who in this work famously demolished St. Thomas Aquinas's “five proofs” of God's existence, though in his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) Kant rediscovered the deity as the source of the postulated moral law and human conscience.

Another great philosophical controversy down the ages has been free will (voluntarism) versus determinism (necessitarianism). Bradlaugh was quite capable of writing more felicitously than in the above definition of atheism, but his *Text-Book* largely consists of chunks of other authors' writings, with

the implication that he agreed with them unless stated otherwise. The reason for this strategy was that on philosophical matters he was generally regarded at that time as merely an ignorant rabble-rouser, so he preferred to quote acknowledged, and usually well-known, experts in the field, whether or not (and it was usually not) they chose to adopt his uncompromising labels. Bradlaugh put the case for determinism briefly, as follows: "The Necessitarian says what is, is, and must have resulted from such and such conditions; but the conditions might have been varied, and the result would then have been different" (*Freethinker's Text-Book*, 183). This idea was expressed more fully in John Stuart Mill's *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*:

What experience makes known is the fact of an invariable sequence between every event and some special combination of antecedent conditions—in such sort that, wherever and whenever that union of antecedents exists, the event does not fail to occur. Any *must* in the case, any necessity, other than the unconditional universality of the fact we know nothing of.

Now, the so-called Necessitarians demand the application of the same rule of judgment to our volitions. They maintain that there is the same evidence for it. They affirm, as a truth of experience, that volitions do, in point of fact, follow determinate antecedents with the same uniformity, and (when we have sufficient knowledge of the circumstances) with the same certainty as other effects follow their causes. (Quoted in *Freethinker's Text-Book*, 561)

This insight is the basis of empirical science and technology: When we press a switch the light always comes on unless there is something wrong with the light or power source. It is also the philosophical refutation of religious free will, which is subscribed to by most Christian sects and Judaism.

Bradlaugh was concerned to distinguish between determinism and predestination, the belief of Calvinistic Christian sects and Islam and fatalism. There is no essential difference between the latter two, save that one is assumed to be the work of God and the other of an anonymous force or forces, and the end result of one is known (heaven, hell, purgatory, or limbo, though three of these are disputed by Protestants and two or one by Roman Catholics), while the outcome of the other is in the unknowable "lap of the gods." Bradlaugh's definition of fatalism is as follows: "The Fatalist says what is, is, and must be, could not have been otherwise" (*Freethinker's Text-Book*, 182–183). Those who accept determinism believe that while the chain of causality cannot be projected too far into the future, personal experience, the experiences of other people, and the findings of science allow immediate consequences of our actions to be predicted with a degree of probability approaching certainty.

According to Mill, a belief that we shall be punished for crime or sin has been implanted in us from outside and does not arise spontaneously from any supposed free will. He designated the creed of all Christians as predestinarian in that they accept as universal the curse of original sin leading to death.

For both believers and unbelievers an apparent difficulty for determinists is penology. "The real question is one of justice—the legitimacy of retribution or punishment. On the theory of necessity, we are told, a man cannot help acting as he does; and it cannot be just that he should be punished for what he cannot help" (*Freethinker's Text-Book*, 184). Mill saw the way out of this problem as follows: "There are two ends which, on the Necessitarian theory, are sufficient to justify punishment: the benefit of the offender himself, and the protection of others" (*Freethinker's Text-Book*, 184).

Bradlaugh also quoted a writer in the *Westminster Review* for April 1876:

But what ground shall we assign for punishment when we suppose it inflicted by a Deity? Granting all the previous difficulties solved, putting aside the question of the origin of evil, putting aside the hypothesis of a creator, still more so of an omnipotent creator, and considering the Deity simply as a ruler, what reason would he have for instituting suffering? Does he institute it in his own defence, or solely in the interest of transgressors? On either supposition the end might be secured by better means. The infliction of punishment is regarded as a defect, even by our poor human educators; their business is to govern by developing the sympathies, by moral suasion, by the influence of high example, and in proportion as they fail in this, they give the measure of their incapacity. How much more, then, must severity be discreditable to a Deity? If our penal legislators find that it is possible to reform criminals, even when taken at maturity, if the progress of our civilization has been marked by a progressive mildness in our codes, and if the duration of each penalty is being made, as far as possible, dependent on the offender's own behaviour, must we not expect a policy benigner still from God, who has the moulding of his charges from their earliest hour, and who can act directly on their minds? If, with such an expectation, we turn to Christianity, our disappointment will indeed be great. Not one of God's punishments is educational; all have the character of wanton ferocity. They are neither made to depend on the offender's subsequent behaviour, nor do they exhibit any proportionality to the transgression; the code of providence is infinitely worse than Draco's, since even death is not not allowed to put an end to the transgressor's sufferings. (Quoted in *Freethinker's Text-Book*, 185)

Not surprisingly, Bradlaugh was a strong supporter of the Humanitarian League, founded by Henry Salt and others in 1889.

Finally on this topic, Bradlaugh quoted with disapproval from Bishop Joseph Butler's *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (1736): "When we speak of God's natural government of the world, it implies government of the very same kind with that which a master exercises over his servant, or a civil magistrate over his subjects." Bradlaugh's response to this sophistry was "Surely there is no analogy here, the master does not create his servant, the civil magistrate is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. The subject may rebel to overthrow the civil governor; the servant may escape from the control of the master. . . . In no sense

can the award of 'eternal torment' be considered as 'in an exact proportion to the offence for which it is the punishment' " (*Freethinker's Text-Book*, 186).

ATTITUDE TO RELIGION

Bradlaugh's anticlericalism was directed against what he saw as the chief current obstacle to mental freedom, civil liberties, and law reform. At first this was biblical fundamentalism, which represented the Bible as not only a religious authority but also a textbook of history, physical and social sciences, and morality. Organizationally, his chief private and public enemy was the Established Church of England, which anointed the sovereign, was represented in the House of Lords, opened law sessions, placed chaplains in all public and military services, ran most schools, and, in rural areas, dominated rites of passage, magistrates' courts, such welfare as existed, and even employment. In his middle years there was an outbreak of Spiritualism, which he investigated, to the chagrin of mediums, through the London Dialectical Society. In his later years, Anglicanism mellowed while hard-line Roman Catholicism grew in ideological prominence and demographic strength.

One of Bradlaugh's nicknames was "Thorough," and no one could accuse him of not studying or understanding what he was criticizing. He astonished his fellow soldiers, who called him "Leaves," by taking to Ireland for his off-duty biblical studies a Greek lexicon and a small Arabic vocabulary "for the use of Hebrew students." These were relatively early days in Britain for the "lower" and "higher" biblical criticisms, originating in Germany in the eighteenth century, for dissecting the Bible's internal contradictions and external sources. Later Bradlaugh paid more attention to theological and moral issues and the explosion of scientific knowledge.

Throughout his career Bradlaugh was an indefatigable lecturer and debater. The total number of his debates in Parliament, on the platform, or in writing is unknown. Of his thirty-two recorded nonparliamentary debates—one with a scurrilous Congregationalist, the Reverend Brewin Grant, extending over six nights—only four were political, involving socialism and the eight-hour (working) day. Of his twenty-eight religious debates, twenty could be called theological. Subjects included the Bible as the Word of God, the credibility of the Gospels, the existence and nature of the soul, the existence and nature of God, human immortality, and miracles. Mostly these debates constituted arguments for or against theism and atheism or secularism (wrongly assumed, because of the personal beliefs of most of its leaders and probably of its members, to be atheistic). The remaining eight debates concerned morality and society, usually couched in the form, for example, "Is Atheism or is Christianity the true Secular Gospel as tending to the improvement and happiness of mankind in this life by human efforts and material means?"

"We claim to search for truth, and to show others what we find. . . . We affirm that in no country ought thought on matters of religion to be hindered by penal law. We declare that in every country religious disabilities should be swept away. . . . We have no desire to prevent or punish any religion by law. We would have all religions, like all sciences, on equal terms, the reward being in the future to the greatest discoverer of new truths, not as it has been in the past, to the most obstinate upholder of ancient delusions. We claim the same equality of citizenship for professors of belief, unbelief, and disbelief. . . . We here all claim to be Freethinkers, therefore we are no more all of one thought than we are of one stature or . . . of one country. Nor do we make any claim that we, or any other thinkers, know all that can be known. We stand by the great ocean of the unknown, each mental eye seeing different shades of colour on its waves, each thought-diver gathering from its depths truth-corals and pearls, that others missed to grasp or cannot reach."

—Charles Bradlaugh, address at an International Freethought Congress,
London, September 25, 1881.

Bradlaugh always believed in the union of secularism and atheism. Long before his reply to Besant's letter in 1874 he had written in the *National Reformer* on February 2, 1861:

As we do not entirely agree with our friend, Mr. Holyoake, in the possibility of separating Secularism from Atheism and Heresy, it may be as well to briefly state our reasons for such disagreement. Mr. Holyoake says truly that Secularism should be "independent of theology," but as theology demands universal empire, independence can only be achieved by Secularistic resistance to Theistic teachings—that is, by the promulgation of Atheistic views. Mr. Holyoake says that Secularism should be "independent of orthodoxy." In this he is correct, but it is only the heterodox who are so independent, so that Atheism and Heresy are necessities for Secularism in the present state of society.

In the preface to a published debate with Holyoake on "Secularism, Scepticism, and Atheism" in 1870, Bradlaugh said of the churches that they claimed jurisdiction over all aspects of life, and "you cannot ignore them or their claim; you must do battle with the priesthood until their power is destroyed" (vii). But in 1866 the principles of the NSS did not refer to atheism, and they still do not.

Bradlaugh's atheist lectures and debates were meaty, yet pitched to the general public—albeit a public that then had a greater religious knowledge and attention span than today's. One must go to his *Text-Book* to see how scholarly was his scientific, philosophical, and theological knowledge. The book's first section is titled "Man: Whence and How?" and the second "Religion:

What and Why?” Its themes can be divided into unbelief and theology, unbelief and science, unbelief and morality, and unbelief and personal freedom.

Unbelief and Theology

Throughout the nineteenth century, overwhelmingly people in Britain were, nominally at least, Christian theists. Over that period unbelief, especially in academia, passed through a number of isms: deism, atheism, secularism, positivism, pantheism, ethicism, agnosticism, rationalism. Though volumes have been written about their differences, these isms tended in practice to be different names for modern secular humanism. Theoretically, however, deism, pantheism, and agnosticism represented variant worldviews.

Deism comes from the Latin, *theism* from the Greek, meaning belief in God; but a very different God. By convention, theism has come to denote a Creator and Sustainer (or Ruler) of the universe, who is involved in the day-to-day activities of humanity; Enlightenment deism advocated a Creator who, after engendering the material universe and the natural and moral laws to regulate it, left it to its own devices to evolve. Coincidentally, after leaving home Bradlaugh was chiefly given refuge by Eliza Sharples, the widowed partner of radical unbeliever Richard Carlile. Carlile started an escalating trend when he announced in his journal, the *Republican*, on March 28, 1823, that he had turned from deism to atheism, though great Anglo-American predecessors like Thomas Paine had been deists who strongly opposed atheism. Carlile realized that the deistic God was an abstraction not worth believing in. So did Bradlaugh, but deism versus atheism was a battle already won when he began his atheist “mission.” He gave deism scant attention, though homage was paid in *NSS Almanacks* to deists as the freethinkers of their day.

Pantheism has been considered briefly in an earlier section. Save for intellectual Hindus, it has always been a concept more debated by philosophers than accepted by believers. The Pantheon of ancient Rome was a temple dedicated to all the gods, not to pantheism.

There remains agnosticism. At a party in 1869 Thomas Henry Huxley coined “agnosticism,” or “a-gnosticism,” to echo St. Paul’s reference to an altar “TO THE UNKNOWN GOD” (Acts 17:23) and as a protest against the Gnostics, an ancient sect he had been studying, that claimed to have a secret knowledge of the universe. Huxley did not write much about it himself and, despite Sir Leslie Stephen’s espousal in the mid-1870s, the label did not really “fire” till an eruption of books and journals with this title in the 1880s. Bradlaugh does not appear to have paid agnosticism much attention save to describe it slightly as “a mere society form of Atheism” (*National Reformer*, July 15, 1883). He perceived that as Lucretius had observed in the first century BCE, “If nothing can be known then we cannot know that we know nothing,” and that whatever else agnostics in practice believed or disbelieved,

they did not accept theism. Significantly, Bradlaugh does not appear to have debated agnosticism versus atheism with Huxley or anyone else. Nevertheless, agnosticism remained the dominant label of unbelievers in Britain and America for more than a hundred years from 1869. Bradlaugh did refer to Huxley in his *Text-Book*, but only in connection with the evolutionist's work on paleontology in *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* (1863).

Atheism was what Bradlaugh really cared about. He was very familiar with Aquinas's "five proofs" (the basis of Thomism) of God: (1) unmoved mover; (2) uncaused cause; (3) prime necessary being; (4) absolute perfection; and (5) source of universal purpose. Lay theists have embraced the second and fifth proofs as "First Cause" and "Final Cause," or "argument from design," respectively, while theologians seem to prefer the third, or "ontological," proof. Bradlaugh was also familiar not only with Kant's refutation of these proofs, but also with the antecedents of both Aquinas and Kant. Chiefly these were, respectively, St. Augustine and St. Anselm, and René Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz. Following the lead of an anonymous theist, whom he commended for fairness and extensively quoted in his *Text-Book*, in the *British Quarterly Review* for July 1871 Bradlaugh combined the first and second of Aquinas's proofs into "cosmo-theological" and the third and fourth into "onto-theological." The fifth he called "physico-theological."

Theological arguments are set out in Part 1, Section 2, of the *Text-Book*, titled "Religion: What and Why? or God = X." Science is treated in Section 1, titled "Man: Whence and How? or, Revealed and Real Science in Conflict." Besant-Scott said that Bradlaugh was a "singularly clear-minded scholar" who "wanted to know the How and the Why of everything" (429, 428). Sensibly, Bradlaugh enunciated a timeless formula: "It should be clearly and specially insisted by Freethinkers that the words used by theologians should have their meanings clearly and definitely stated. . . . All believers in God include in the word 'religion' as some belief in a Deity, and as they certainly have a prior claim to the term, it appears to me to be wiser, franker, more honest, to avoid using an old word in a new sense" (*Freethinker's Text-Book*, 108). The anti-theological sources he used were the works of other clear thinkers and writers, notably Mill's *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* and George Henry Lewes's *Biographical History of Philosophy* (1845–46).

With regard to the cosmotheological (causal) "proof," Bradlaugh would probably have preferred to say that "unmoved mover" and "uncaused cause" are simply oxymorons and intrinsically absurd. Instead, he met the theologians on their own turf with a detailed exposition of their case and equally detailed refutations by freethinkers. He stated the religious position as an essay to prove the existence of a supreme self-existent cause, and he countered it with the following: "If it be possible to conceive an endless chain, there is no room to talk of its beginning. . . . Infinite signifies nothing more than indefinite. . . . The mind cannot conceive extension *per se*, either absolute or final. It can only conceive something extended" (*Freethinker's Text-Book*, 133–134).

The ontotheological (necessary perfect being) “proof” was succinctly dismissed by Bradlaugh: “There is no such ideal of beauty, goodness, and grandeur common to all men” (*Freethinker’s Text-Book*, 122). This postulate

involves two errors; first, that “an idea of an absolutely perfect being” can be formed; and, second, that every idea in the mind must have its actual counterpart existent. An insane person’s idea, that he is followed by a yellow dog, . . . would, in this case, require the admission of the actuality of the abnormal dog. The truth is that every supposed extranatural being is only a compound of parts of natural beings, severed from their appropriate belongings; man’s imaginative faculties cannot so transcend his experience as to enable him to create new materials; they can only recombine the old materials in new forms; and from the horns, hoofs, tails, shapes, of the animals around him, unicorns, devils, or dragons are moulded. (*Freethinker’s Text-Book*, 123)

Following the anonymous theist in the *British Quarterly Review*, Bradlaugh divided the teleotheological “proof” into technotheological, or argument from design, and tyotheological, or argument from universal order; and he added, without exploring, a third component, animal instinct. First popularized by Archdeacon William Paley and Lord Brougham, the argument from design has become even more popular today as “intelligent design.” Briefly, it states that because a watch has a watchmaker, the universe and everything in it must have a maker. Bradlaugh cited Lewes’s observations from embryology: Every animal passes through a succession of stages in its development that mimic earlier forms of life and have no bearing on its future state. Thus the idea of “special” creation was a misnomer. So was the word *creation* because, even if true, the design argument would merely demonstrate that the deity was an “artificer” molding existing matter in identifiable time and space, not that he “created” it or that he was omnipotent, omniscient, infinite, and eternal. The crucial question was “Why may not that Designer have been at some remote period himself designed? . . . Why may not the phenomena of the universe be the mere endless evolution of the universe itself?” (*Freethinker’s Text-Book*, 146).

Unbelief and Science

While there is a philosophy of science, there does not appear to be a science of philosophy. In his *Text-Book*, therefore, Bradlaugh cited science, of which he had a good theoretical knowledge, simply to refute the biblical account of creation and to support the theory of evolution. But he did not accept the view propounded in his day—and ours—that science and religion could be separated linguistically and psychologically, so that one could believe implicitly in both at the same time. He was fortunate to be writing after, and able to draw on, such seminal works as Sir Charles Lyell’s *Geological Evidence of the Antiquity of Man*, Thomas Henry Huxley’s *Evidence as to Man’s Place*

in *Nature*, and Karl Vogt's *Lectures on Mankind*, all published in 1863; Sir John Lubbock's *Prehistoric Times* (1865) and *Origin of Civilization* (1870); and Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871).

In Bradlaugh's early years almost all Christians were religious fundamentalists. While theologians might still debate relativities within the Blessed Trinity and the dual nature of Jesus Christ, the laity accepted by faith and freethinkers largely ignored these divine mysteries. Central to Christians and their debates with secularists was the "verbal inspiration" (literal truth) of Holy Writ in describing the creation of the world and humanity's flattering role at its heart.

In the Bible, God created the universe in six days according to different timetables; Genesis 1 placed humanity at the end, and Genesis 2 at the beginning, of life on earth. Tracing biblical genealogies, Dr. John Lightfoote and Archbishop James Ussher calculated that this event occurred in 4004 BCE, though on different days. In his studies Bradlaugh found that the Authorized Version of the Old Testament followed the Hebrew text, which differed significantly from the Greek Septuagint and the Samaritan versions. Increasingly, however, through the nineteenth century, the prime intellectual controversy became how the order of creation in Genesis 1 and the biblical age of the world conflicted with scientific knowledge. In his *Text-Book* Bradlaugh meticulously followed this debate. His account is substantially true today, though details such as dating have improved. Ethnology, anthropology, paleontology, geology, and ecology, with their studies, respectively, of racial diversity, human artifacts, fossils, rocks, and biological systems, combined to prove the earth hugely older than six thousand years—a necessary precondition of evolution. As Bradlaugh recognized, this theory still had unanswered questions in 1876, and freethinkers were not obliged to adopt "without reservation the views of Mr. Charles Darwin or of Mr. Herbert Spencer" (*Freethinker's Text-Book*, 87).

Some Christians accepted evolution and tried to square it with religious belief by saying that the biblical "day . . . does not mean a period of 24 hours, but really represents . . . a vast age" (*Freethinker's Text-Book*, 21). This view was, however, negated by the repeated association of "day" in Genesis 1 with "the evening and the morning." Moreover, the biblical sequence of events, such as flowering plants being the first form of life, was wrong, and the Sabbath was not "an indefinite period."

Discrediting the Bible was no academic exercise for Bradlaugh, since the "good book" presented objectionable views on morality, penology, women, witches, and civil liberties.

Unbelief and Morality

In his *Text-Book*, following the *British Quarterly Review* Bradlaugh brought the "proofs" of God's existence back to five by adding "ethico-theological" and "eso-theological." He divided the first into "deonto-theological" (the "direct

and intuitive" voice of conscience) and "Kantian" (the "indirect and inferential" belief that, at least in a future life, virtue will be rewarded and evil punished). Both of these are products of a postulated universal and preexistent moral law.

Esotheological denoted "the only unassailable stronghold of Theism, that of intuition" (*British Quarterly Review*, July 1871). Bradlaugh expressed this perception as follows: "It has been broadly contended that man is a religious animal, and it is no infrequent thing to hear it asserted that all men, however barbarous, have some religion" (*Freethinker's Text-Book*, 97). Quoting Lubbock, he rejected the view. It and the previous "proof" are linked by "intuition" as an assumed personal revelation.

Kant believed that there was an inseparable link between virtue and happiness independent of ourselves and therefore communicated by God, the only way to avoid skepticism flowing from sensory experience alone, and the source of "sovereign good" in nature. Bradlaugh's response was "This assumed 'sovereign good' exists only in the imagination of Kant. . . . The existence of any 'guilt' or 'misery' is conclusive against a supreme cause sufficient for universal 'sovereign good'" (*Freethinker's Text-Book*, 152).

Bradlaugh's involvement in the birth control cause began in 1858, when he advertised in the *Investigator* and the *National Reformer* George Drysdale's 1854 free-love "Bible of the Brothel," *The Elements of Social Science; or, Physical, Sexual, and Natural Religion*. In 1877 Charles Watts, Bradlaugh's uncontracted subeditor, printer, and publisher, was prosecuted for reprinting American physician Charles Knowlton's 1832 treatise *Fruits of Philosophy; or, The Private Companion of Young Married Couples*. Urged by Bradlaugh and Besant, Watts initially agreed to defend the book. When he changed his mind, Bradlaugh harshly sacked him and, with Besant, formed the Freethought Publishing Company to republish the *Fruits* with a new subtitle, medical revisions by Drysdale, and a new preface, "honestly believing that on all questions affecting . . . happiness . . . fullest right of free discussion ought to be maintained" ("Preface," iv). They were convicted of issuing "a certain indecent, lewd, filthy, bawdy, and obscene book," sentenced to six months in jail, and fined, but they successfully appealed on a legal technicality.

Bradlaugh was particularly critical of intuition, save in George Henry Lewes's admission of "experiences which are not specified or cannot now be specified, although originally they were capable of being so" (1.373). "What is called intuition," said Bradlaugh, is "an emotional declaration, not a reasonable argument. . . . We utterly deny any ideas which are not the results of

perception or reflection on perception” (*Freethinker’s Text-Book*, 167, 113). He endorsed Besant’s *True Basis of Morality* of 1875: “Intuition, to be of any real value, must be universal in its testimony: but it turns out to be as variable as the various nations of the earth. It depends on race civilization, on custom, on habit” (quoted in *Freethinker’s Text-Book*, 164).

As to personal morality, his family called him puritanical, unhappy about smoking at concerts and in the music hall. In the *National Reformer* of July 27, 1861, he impressed on secular societies: “Let no man remain a member who is habitually a drunkard, or who ill-treats his wife or neglects his children, or who is guilty of immorality.”

Unbelief and Personal Freedom

Throughout his life Bradlaugh saw how religion curbed mental freedom while acknowledged unbelief curbed physical freedom. In *Jesus, Shelley, and Malthus* he censured the Gospel Jesus: “Poverty of spirit is no virtue. Honesty of spirit, manliness of spirit, bold, uncompromising, determined resistance of wrong, and assertion of right should be taught” (6). He felt particularly strongly about the way blasphemy laws were used to muzzle the free expression of opinion. His *Laws Relating to Blasphemy and Heresy* proclaimed:

Laws to punish differences of opinion are as useless as they are monstrous. Differences of opinion on politics are denounced and punished as seditious, on religious topics as blasphemous, and on social questions as immoral and obscene. Yet the sedition, blasphemy, and immorality published in one age are often found to be the accepted, and sometimes the admired, political, religious, and social teaching of a more educated period. (3)

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Richard Dawkins

Donald R. Burleson

Trailblazing evolutionary biologist and eloquently outspoken atheist Richard Dawkins (full name Clinton Richard Dawkins) was born in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1941 and went to England with his family at the age of eight. Even as a child he struggled with the question of the existence of God, this struggle foreshadowing a lifelong intellectual engagement—ultimately from the standpoint of an accomplished and insightful scientist—with this fundamental philosophical problem.

Having earned a DPhil degree at Oxford in 1966, Dawkins taught biology first at the University of California at Berkeley and later at Oxford, where in 1989 he would take a DSc degree and in 1995 would accept an appointment as the Charles Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science. By this time he had published exceedingly influential works in genetics and the theory of evolution.

His philosophical position on atheism, in fact, may best be appreciated in terms of his orientation as a scientist. That is, if one understands the value of the contributions Dawkins has made to the scientific scrutiny of how evolution works, one better understands his view of (to use Percy Bysshe Shelley's phrase) the necessity of atheism, since it is central to Dawkins's position that, in the end, science and religion are in so fundamental an opposition that it is not possible (or desirable) to reconcile them. Dawkins himself, though in youth he had once accepted the existence of God on the basis of arguments from intelligent design, came to reject these arguments precisely because his understanding of science, especially advances in the theory of evolution, rendered the notion of "design" illusory.

DAWKINS ON THE SELFISH GENE

Dawkins came to high-profile public attention in 1976 with the publication of *The Selfish Gene*, the book in which he introduced the concept of *meme*

and postulated that the gene is the real agent of Darwinian selection in evolution.

Many people not deeply well read in the theory of genetics and evolutionary biology are probably unaware that the very term *gene* is tricky to define. Dawkins defines it as “any portion of chromosomal material that potentially lasts for enough generations to serve as a unit of natural selection” (*Selfish Gene* [hereafter *SG*], 28), or as “a genetic unit that is small enough to last for a large number of generations and to be distributed around in the form of many copies” (32). Dawkins characterizes the gene as a “selfish” replicator, an unconscious agent whose only “wish” (if one speaks metaphorically, as if the gene were a conscious agent) is to promote itself, in vast numbers of copies, as successfully and prolifically as possible in the gene pool. Dawkins gives a wealth of examples in which living organisms exhibit certain qualities because their preprogramming in their genetic makeup has predisposed them to have precisely the features that most conduce to continued proliferation of the gene itself, the animal or plant organism being a robotlike “survival machine” providing a haven for the gene and enabling its further replication.

“Many of us saw religion as harmless nonsense. Beliefs might lack all supporting evidence but, we thought, if people needed a crutch for consolation, where’s the harm? September 11th changed all that. Revealed faith is not harmless nonsense, it can be lethally dangerous nonsense.”

—Richard Dawkins, “Has the World Changed?” *Guardian* (London),
October 11, 2001

Dawkins describes certain “evolutionarily stable strategies,” taking care always to stress that the word *strategy* is metaphorical and not intended to suggest conscious planning, and defining an evolutionarily stable strategy as “a strategy which, if most members of a population adopt it, cannot be bettered by an alternative strategy” (*SG*, 69). An example might be a female bird’s laying the optimal number of eggs to give high probability to the survival of her genes. Natural selection itself determines the behavioral policies that define “optimal” in such circumstances, and an important aspect of Dawkins’s point is that one need *not* hypothesize any underlying “design” or “purpose” to see how the world works.

Sometimes genetic copying involves mutations or aberrations in replication: “Occasionally a new gene does succeed in invading the set: it succeeds in spreading through the gene pool. There is a transitional period of instability, terminating in a new evolutionarily stable set—a little bit of evolution has occurred” (*SG*, 86).

Not only does life evolve, but culture does as well. Dawkins introduced the concept of the *meme*, a sort of genelike unit of conceptual replication that arises not out of the “primeval soup” but out of “the soup of human culture”—as, for example, “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or building arches”—in such a way that if an idea is destined to be successful in the “meme pool,” it will manage “to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain” (SG, 192).

Here Dawkins begins to foreshadow his eventually extended concern with the problem of religion, as he characterizes the idea of God itself as a meme, pointing out that this concept, however imaginary, has high survival value in human culture because it “provides a superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence” (SG, 193). Dawkins does not further engage with religion per se in this volume except to remark, in his endnotes, that blind religious faith “seems to me to qualify as a kind of mental illness. It leads people to believe in whatever it is so strongly that they are prepared to kill and to die for it without the need for further justification” (330). With characteristic candor and wit, he remarks that some people’s religious belief “even immunizes them against fear, if they honestly believe that a martyr’s death will send them straight to heaven. What a weapon! Religious faith deserves a chapter to itself in the annals of war technology” (331). Although Dawkins’s skirmish with religion in this volume is brief, the book certainly lays the groundwork for a more extensive scientific understanding of the universe as a place that manages to exist perfectly well without divine will, purpose, or design. Dawkins sums up his plan, in terms of both genes and memes, for the book: “I want to claim almost limitless power for slightly inaccurate self-replicating entities, once they arise anywhere in the universe” (322).

RELIGION AS A “VIRUS”

Dawkins’s real argument against the notion of intelligent design comes in *The Blind Watchmaker*, whose title harks back to a work by eighteenth-century theologian William Paley called *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity Collected from the Appearances of Nature*, published in 1802. Paley put forward the argument that just as a person finding a watch while crossing a heath must conclude that in order for the watch to be present on the heath there must have been a watchmaker, a person encountering the complexities of nature must conclude that anything so seemingly intricate in “design” must imply that there had to be a designer, that is, a God.

Dawkins acknowledges that Paley “had a proper reverence for the complexity of the living world” (*Blind Watchmaker* [hereafter *BW*], 7) but unfortunately drew the wrong conclusions: “wrong, gloriously and utterly wrong. . . . Natural selection, the blind, unconscious, automatic process which Darwin

discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence and apparently purposeful form of all life, has no purpose in mind. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the *blind* watchmaker” (9). Design, Dawkins is at pains to explain in this volume, is an illusion created by the remarkable effects, in the living world, of natural selection operating in exceedingly gradual evolutionary stages distributed over unimaginably vast stretches of time.

Natural selection, essentially as envisioned by Darwin, gives so satisfying an account of the living world, without recourse to any explanation by intelligent design, that “although atheism might have been *logically* tenable before Darwin,” Dawkins says, “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist” (BW, 10). This position and Dawkins’s defenses of natural selection generally have earned him the nickname “Darwin’s rottweiler” (a reference to evolutionist Thomas Henry Huxley’s once having been dubbed “Darwin’s bulldog”).

The primary distinctions made in *The Blind Watchmaker* are the distinctions between random and nonrandom and between probable and improbable. While many religious apologists would claim that anything so complex as life could not have arisen randomly or by chance and that the only alternative to this dilemma is explanation by intelligent design, Dawkins argues that a nondesigned world of seemingly improbable complexity is *not* one arising at random in the sense meant by proponents of religion. Indeed life “could not have come into existence in a single act of chance. We shall explain its coming into existence as a consequence of gradual, cumulative, step-by-step transformations from simpler things, from primordial objects sufficiently simple to have come into being by chance” (22). The initial part of the process was simple: the spontaneous production, in the “primordial soup,” of a rudimentary kind of replicator far simpler than the later replicator DNA. The later operations of natural selection were so structured as to be “the very opposite of random” (59), by way of cumulative and very gradual, unconscious “acts” of nonrandom selection tightly structured by the exigencies of survivability in the gene pool. The results give the *illusion* of design without having required it.

Dawkins further argues for the absence of intelligent design by pointing out evolutionary *imperfections* that could scarcely be expected to appear if the world had a “designer” God. In particular, he points out that in the retina of the eye in all vertebrate creatures, including humans, the “photocells” and the optic “wires” (nerves) both point in impractical directions. Such mistakes are contrary to the very notion of design but quite feasible in evolutionary terms.

Besides, Dawkins argues, the notion of God suffers from the implications of probability theory itself: “Any God capable of intelligently designing something as complex as the DNA/protein replicating machine must have been at least as complex and organized as that machine itself” (BW, 200), and if one is going to say that God has always existed, one might logically just as well admit that the universe itself could always have existed.

Some people have speculated that perhaps evolution is real but represents either constant or sporadic interference by an intelligent designer; of this position Dawkins simply remarks, "In Darwin's view, the whole *point* of the theory of evolution by natural selection was that it provided a *non-miraculous* account of the existence of complex adaptations. . . . For Darwin, any evolution that had to be helped over jumps by God was not evolution at all. It made a nonsense of the central point of evolution" (BW, 355).

Dawkins devotes even more detailed analysis to the whole topic of "improbable" complexity that is not really improbable, in a book titled *Climbing Mount Improbable*, where the imagery of the title suggests that one may render the "improbable" probable by climbing the mountain, so to speak, in slow, winding gradations, the point again being that there is no need to invoke a creationist's God to answer to the improbability of natural complexity since that supposed improbability is a misunderstanding to begin with.

DAWKINS AS ESSAYIST

While the books mentioned thus far do take some well-aimed shots at religion, their primary focus is on the principles of biological evolution as understood by meticulous application of the scientific method; the objections here to religious faith are natural but peripheral consequences of that reasoning. Dawkins, however, has produced a considerable number of essays, some of which (like the later book *The God Delusion*) focus on religion per se, and some of which have been gathered (along with essays on other topics) into the volume *A Devil's Chaplain*. Dawkins, here as elsewhere, is altogether disinclined to be in any way apologetic about the hard line he has taken. In his introduction to the group of essays called "The Infected Mind," he remarks, "To describe religions as mind viruses is sometimes interpreted as contemptuous or even hostile. It is both" (*Devil's Chaplain* [hereafter DC], 117).

The essay "Viruses of the Mind" is particularly pointed in its witty but unrelenting indictment of religious belief as a sort of infectious illness that invades the mind and replicates itself in order to spread in epidemic proportions much as a biological virus might do.

Discussing the manner in which both epidemiological viruses and computer viruses propagate, Dawkins identifies two primary qualities that any sort of virus (including the ones that, like religion, function as parasitic replicators in a generalized sense) must have to succeed in spreading itself around: "first, a readiness to replicate information accurately, perhaps with some mistakes that are subsequently reproduced accurately; and, second, a readiness to obey instructions encoded in the information so replicated" (DC, 135).

The application to the spread of religious belief systems, Dawkins explains, is that since children are predisposed by evolution to acquire the culture into which they are born, they are in effect preprogrammed for the very sort of

"We are all atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further."

—Richard Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain*, 150.

gullibility that, together with the human brain's remarkable capacity for processing information, must make a child's mind a well-nigh perfectly suitable breeding ground for the religious "virus."

Dawkins follows Bertrand Russell and others in stressing that, due to the widespread practice of indoctrinating the young prior to their having sufficiently well-developed critical faculties to resist believing what they are told, "the vast majority of children follow the religion of their parents rather than any of the other available religions. Instructions to genuflect, to bow towards Mecca, to nod one's head rhythmically towards the wall, to shake like a maniac, to 'speak in tongues'—the list of such arbitrary and pointless motor patterns offered by religion alone is extensive—are obeyed, if not slavishly, at least with some reasonably high statistical probability" (*DC*, 136).

Further, Dawkins says, the "mind-parasites" of religion in these infection-ready environments may well even resemble mutually beneficial genes in their ability to survive and replicate; there may be "a ganging up of ideas that flourish in one another's presence, ideas that support one another just as genes do. . . . These gangs will come to constitute a package, which may be sufficiently stable to deserve a collective name such as Roman Catholicism or Voodoo. . . . What matters is that minds are friendly environments to parasitic, self-replicating ideas or information, and that minds are typically massively infected" (*DC*, 137).

Further pursuing the religion-as-virus concept, Dawkins imagines what it might be like if a medical textbook described the symptoms exhibited in the sufferers of such a virus. His hypothetical textbook lists a number of such symptoms: the patient is compelled to believe things unsupported by evidence, finds that the "invading" propositions he believes are self-perpetuating in that they automatically undercut any opposition to themselves, finds that "mystery" or incomprehensibility of the propositions in question is a good thing in itself, and feels that the more fantastic and unsupported a belief is, the more fervently he must believe it. Dawkins concludes this line of thought by suggesting that if religion is an invading viral presence, scientific reason "could function rather like a piece of antiviral software" (*DC*, 141).

In other essays in *A Devil's Chaplain* Dawkins is similarly insistent, with a view to applying his censure of religion to specific real-world events. In "Time to Stand Up" he says, "To blame Islam for what happened in New York is like blaming Christianity for the troubles in Northern Ireland. Yes, precisely. It is time to stop pussyfooting around. Time to get angry. And not only with Islam"

(DC, 156). And “my last vestige of ‘hands off religion’ respect disappeared in the smoke and choking dust of September 11th 2001. . . . It is time for people of intellect, as opposed to people of faith, to stand up and say ‘Enough!’” (157).

He concludes the essay “Time to Stand Up” by pointing out that of all the forces that work to divide people into mutually hostile camps, “religion is unusual among divisive labels in being spectacularly *unnecessary*.” And with reference again to the religiously motivated atrocities of 9/11, Dawkins asks, “Is there no catastrophe terrible enough to shake the faith of people, on both sides, in God’s goodness and power? No glimmering realization that he might not be there at all: that we just might be on our own, needing to cope with the real world like grown-ups?” (DC, 160).

THE GOD DELUSION

Clearly, Dawkins excels at the essay form, and just as clearly the essays mentioned make quintessential strikes against the authority, value, and validity of religious belief systems. But the real watershed of Richard Dawkins’s incursions into the problem of religion, the real distillation of his thought, are to be found in the vividly antitheistic volume *The God Delusion*. This book, at the time of this writing, has remained on the *New York Times* best seller list for over forty weeks, having been listed as number four at one point and having been number two in sales on Amazon.com, a remarkable performance considering that, as Dawkins himself so effectively points out in various of his writings, religion, especially in America, commonly seems to manage to place itself outside the realm of phenomena that one can openly criticize, if one is to have one’s criticism well received.

In *The God Delusion* Dawkins begins by pointing out that while many people no doubt chafe at having to adhere to the religious belief system into which they were born, they do not seem to realize that they can defect from that system and set themselves mentally free. Dawkins outlines a program, for the book, consisting of four consciousness-raising messages he wishes to impart: (1) that “to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one” (*God Delusion* [hereafter *GD*], 1); (2) that the power of Darwinian natural selection is sufficiently strong to account for life on earth without any need of the hypothesis of a creator God; (3) that the propagation of religion is due to childhood indoctrination and has no other reason for being; and (4) that “being an atheist is nothing to be apologetic about. On the contrary, it is something to be proud of, standing tall to face the far horizon, for atheism nearly always indicates a healthy independence of mind and, indeed, a healthy mind” (*GD*, 3). Dawkins goes on to say that undoubtedly many people really are atheists at heart but hesitate to let their true views be known because, in America at least, religion has a powerful stranglehold on the public consciousness, to the extent that the term *atheist* is held to be a stigmatizing

label almost calling into question one's proper citizenship and one's decency as a human being. The program laid out for the book is to enable people to break loose from that stranglehold and view life in the universe boldly and with truly open minds.

Dawkins first dispenses with the notion, often cited by religious believers, that so eminent a scientist as Albert Einstein believed in God, in the sense in which, say, Christians do. Einstein described himself as "a deeply religious nonbeliever" but hastened to point out that this "religiosity" consisted of a profound awe in the face of the mysteries of the universe. Dawkins quotes him as stating quite clearly, "I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly" (*GD*, 15). Dawkins distinguishes between this science-inspired awe—a kind of respectable response, on the one hand, to the nature of the world—and the more conventional view of God, which he assesses as altogether unworthy of respect. He stresses the central importance of the distinction: "The metaphorical or pantheistic God of the physicists is light years away from the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs and rabbis, and of ordinary language. Deliberately to confuse the two is, in my opinion, an act of intellectual high treason" (19). This latter notion of God, the sense in which almost everyone understands the term, forms the target of Dawkins's scrutiny for the remainder of the book.

"Does a scientific and evolutionary world view such as that proffered by Richard Dawkins obviate a sense of spirituality? I think not. If we define spirituality as a sense of awe and wonder about the grandeur of life and the cosmos, then science has much to offer."

—Michael Shermer, "The Skeptic's Chaplain," in Grafen and Ridley, 234.

With regard to religions based upon this traditional concept of God, Dawkins has a great deal to say, by way of many examples, about the disproportionate consideration and respect that governments and private citizens alike afford religion. He cites a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 2006 allowing celebrants of a church in New Mexico to use an otherwise illegal hallucinogenic drug to enhance their understanding of God, the point being that such a privilege was allowed only because of religious assertions bearing no trace of evidence.

With regard to Islam, Dawkins further cites examples in which actions have taken place because religious sensibilities were slighted, the primary example being the furor arising over the publication in 2006, in the newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in Denmark, of a group of cartoons caricaturing the prophet Muhammad. In meticulous detail Dawkins describes the shock wave that passed

through the Islamic world. There was violence not only in Denmark itself but in several other countries, including Indonesia, Pakistan, and Nigeria; buildings were burned, Danish exports were boycotted, and people were killed. Dawkins's point in describing all this is simply that the "hurt" and the "offense" evoking all the violence only assumed such importance because the Danish cartoons offended *religious* beliefs; by contrast, political figures get caricatured every day in newspaper cartoons, as do political parties and indeed whole governments, without anyone thinking that any violent responses are appropriate. In short, religion enjoys specious privileges not given in any other area of human concern. Dawkins says, "I shall not go out of my way to offend, but nor shall I don kid gloves to handle religion any more gently than I would handle anything else" (GD, 27).

Indeed, there are no kid gloves on when he goes on to describe the biblical God as "arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully" (GD, 31). To counter the hypothesis that a creator God exists, Dawkins advocates an alternative hypothesis: that "*any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution*" (31; italics in the original). God, as something that could not thus be hypothesized as having created the universe, is a delusion, despite social and even political pressures to believe in him.

With regard to these political pressures, Dawkins gives reasons for feeling that the Founding Fathers would be horrified to see the extent of religious fanaticism rampant in modern-day America despite the country's being legally secular. From such quotations as Thomas Jefferson's "Christianity is the most perverted system that has ever shone on man" to Benjamin Franklin's "Light-houses are more useful than churches" to John Adams's "This would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it," Dawkins gives the lie to the notion that the United States of America was founded by religious enthusiasts who meant for there to be a state religion.

A central point in Dawkins's philosophy is that while science cannot absolutely *disprove* the existence of God, it can and does relegate the notion of God to the realm of the extremely improbable, a point much like Bertrand Russell's famous remark that maybe there is a golden teapot somewhere in orbit around the sun—while one cannot disprove this, a sensible person can reasonably disbelieve it.

But with reference to the implications of science, Dawkins has had something of a philosophical adversary in Stephen Jay Gould, who in a book called *The Rock of Ages* coined the term "non-overlapping magisteria" to suggest that science (concerned with matters of fact) and religion (concerned with matters of meaning and value) are such disjoint areas, or "magisteria," that science cannot impinge on religion at all.

Dawkins, of course, rejects this view, finding it unaccountable that some legitimate questions are deemed “beyond” science and are handed over to the theologians, when those questions (if they even mean anything) are no doubt “beyond” theology, too. “Not every English sentence beginning with the word ‘why,’” Dawkins points out, “is a legitimate question” (*GD*, 56). How is it, he asks, that theology can find valid answers to questions too deep for science when it is difficult to give any reason why theology is a legitimate content-bearing subject of study at all? The “God hypothesis,” at any rate, remains, for Dawkins, a *scientific* hypothesis capable of being validated, if at all, only on scientific grounds. Science, however, he argues, points in the opposite direction.

In *The God Delusion* Dawkins also examines the various traditional arguments for the existence of God, those derived from Thomas Aquinas, and finds them wanting. The “ontological argument,” for example, comes up empty of content when one notices that it is a mere word game: God would have to be the most perfect entity conceivable, and a perfect entity could lack no desirable attributes, so since existence is a desirable attribute, God must exist. Of this argument Dawkins wryly remarks that one must have a “deep suspicion of any line of reasoning that reached such a significant conclusion without feeding in a single piece of data from the real world” (*GD*, 82). And in particular, the “teleological argument,” or argument from design, falls apart in the wake of nonrandom natural selection, which in its gradually formed complexities produces (in many people’s minds) the illusion of deliberate design. And Dawkins sticks to his guns concerning the relative probabilities of a creationist God versus an undesigned universe: “A designer God cannot be used to explain organized complexity because any God capable of designing anything would have to be complex enough to demand the same kind of explanation in his own right” (109).

Dawkins employs much of the remaining portions of *The God Delusion* examining the question of whether there can be a genuine basis for human morality in the absence of God, answering that question in the affirmative. He sides with Michael Shermer, author of *The Science of Good and Evil*, in reasoning that if a person admits that in the absence of God he would rob, rape, and murder, that person brands himself as a sorry specimen of humanity; yet, if the same person admits that he would continue to act morally even in the absence of any God, the very admission undermines the claim that the notion of God is in any way essential to human morality. In fact, Dawkins says, religious faith itself, from the viewpoint of atheist morality, is evil, both because it fosters atrocious behavior (global terrorism, murder, torture, oppression) and because it exists without foundation: “Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument” (*GD*, 308). Hitler himself, Dawkins points out, in contrast to widely held misconceptions to the contrary, was deeply religious, having declared in *Mein Kampf* that he was doing the will of God.

Richard Dawkins had what he calls “a normal Anglican upbringing,” to him a “less noxious” kind of religious indoctrination than many another kind might have been. But he has long since come to argue adamantly that, in general, religious indoctrination of children is an especially pernicious form of child abuse, particularly when it involves threatening children with unfounded hellfire-and-damnation stories that they do not yet possess sufficiently developed critical faculties to resist, and that, unfortunately, they are likely to continue to believe throughout their lives.

While numerous highly favorable reviews have appeared, one must mention that, not surprisingly, considering the prevalence of religious belief systems, Dawkins’s writings on the subject have encountered various kinds of opposition and disagreement. Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, reviewing *The God Delusion* in the *London Review of Books*, accuses Dawkins of not knowing or understanding religious concepts sufficiently well to counter them meaningfully. Oxford theologian Alister McGrath has raised similar objections. Dawkins’s answer to this kind of criticism is that with theology (as opposed to church history and the like) there is simply nothing to understand, because theological propositions are without foundation and quite possibly even without meaning.

H. Allen Orr, writing in the *New York Review of Books*, similarly complains that Dawkins fails to discuss religious thought in a sufficiently serious or penetrating way, or at an elevated enough level of sophistication. Again, Dawkins’s view of this sort of thing is that the very notion of “religious thought” is vacuous, as religion does not really constitute a legitimate subject of study with any genuine substance.

Even skeptical commentator Michael Shermer, while expressly admiring Dawkins’s view of the primacy of science and the dubious foundations of religion, chafes a bit (writing in *Science*) at the harsh tone of *The God Delusion*. Dawkins clearly recognizes this harshness but finds it justified, given the manifest harm done by religion and given the foolishness of holding religion uniquely exempt from censure.

All in all, Dawkins has ruffled a lot of feathers but has provided a great deal of inspiration and has provoked a great deal of thought in an area of human concern often taken to be closed to criticism. Writing with a fluid, dynamic, and honest style, he engages with the problem of religion energetically and enunciates the atheist position with lucidity, passion, and courage, clearly finding, in the rejection of all supernatural gods, not cynicism or bleakness of outlook but a sense of wonder and delight at the natural workings of the universe.

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Daniel C. Dennett

Richard Gillilan

In the popular press, Daniel C. Dennett's name has often been associated with outspoken atheist polemicists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. Indeed, Hitchens comments, "It's an honor to be mentioned in the same breath as these men. If there were seven of us, the clever press would call us dwarves. As we are a quartet, we are doomed to be called the Gang of Four or the Four Musketeers. My own nomination—the Four Horsemen of the Counter-Apocalypse—is a bit cumbersome and I'd welcome suggestions" (Hitchens, 8). To be sure, Dennett has engaged in his share of widely publicized debates with Christian apologists, but the work of this professor of philosophy, a codirector of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University, hardly seems to fit the category of polemic. Dennett's book *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, for example, stands out more as an impassioned plea to study religion: "Religion is too important for us to remain ignorant about. It affects not just our social, political, and economic conflicts, but the very meanings we find in our lives. For many people, probably a majority of the people on Earth, nothing matters more than religion. For this reason, it is imperative that we learn as much as we can about it" (14).

Dennett's work extends well beyond the study of religion. After graduating from Harvard University with a BA in 1963, he received his PhD in philosophy from the University of Oxford in 1965. In more than forty years of academic work, he has made significant contributions to fields as diverse as consciousness, developmental psychology, artificial intelligence, and evolutionary theory, to name a few. At some ten publications per year, he has generated a legacy that has been the subject of a number of books and academic symposia (see, for example, Ross et al.). Dennett is perhaps best known for his unique and popular approach to philosophy, particularly his stories and philosophical humor. He has also worked closely with the scientific community. Biologist Francisco

Varela points out, “I like Dennett’s pulling up his sleeves and going into the lab with people. He’s done something quite revolutionary, which is to steep himself in the scientific literature” (“Intuition Pumps,” 193). Perhaps most famously, Dennett has promoted the application of evolutionary principles to fields outside biology. In a short work such as this, it is only possible to touch upon a few of his major philosophical contributions having significant moral and religious implications, such as intentionality and free will. Finally, this overview will conclude with a look at Daniel C. Dennett’s role as a public figure in the freethought movement.

INTUITION PUMPS

Dennett’s approach to philosophy has been both unconventional and, at times, controversial. Dahlbom writes, “When other philosophers use definitions and arguments, Daniel Dennett will make his point by telling a story. So, if you ask him about his view on a specific question, he will scratch his beard and hem and haw, but only for a few seconds before going into a narrative mode, launching into a wonderful story. His philosophy is in his stories” (Dahlbom, 1). Some of his most notable contributions have come in the form of thought experiments, which he terms “intuition pumps.”

In his popular essay entitled “Where Am I?” Dennett tells a tale of being recruited by the Pentagon for a secret mission to recover a lost warhead buried under Tulsa, Oklahoma. As it happens, the warhead is enshrouded in radiation that is lethal to brain tissue but otherwise harmless to the human body. How can it be retrieved? Thanks to some very advanced medical technology, the Pentagon proceeds to separate Dennett’s brain from his body, establishing a remote radio-controlled link between body and brain. With his brain safely in a vat of fluid at Houston, Dennett’s body is free to travel to Oklahoma to retrieve the warhead.

When I came out of anesthesia, I opened my eyes, looked around, and asked the inevitable question: “Where am I?” The nurse smiled down at me. “You’re in Houston,” she said, and I reflected that this still had a chance of being the truth one way or another. She handed me a mirror. Sure enough, there were the tiny antennae poling up through their titanium ports cemented into my skull. . . . I thought to myself: “Well here I am, sitting on a folding chair, staring through a piece of plate glass at my own brain. . . . But wait, shouldn’t I have thought ‘Here I am, suspended in a bubbling fluid, being stared at by my own eyes’? . . . How did I know *where* I meant by ‘here’ when I thought ‘here’?” (*Brainstorms*, 310)

After setting up this far-fetched scenario, Dennett engages in a series of comical experiments and observations showing how common philosophical approaches fail to resolve the ambiguities. When the Pentagon reveals that it has secretly kept another synchronized working copy of Dennett’s brain that

can be seamlessly switched over to control his body, the philosophical questions get even more interesting. Of intuition pumps, Dennett writes, “[They are] like Plato’s cave, and Descartes’ evil demon, and Hobbes’ vision of the state of nature and the social contract, and even Kant’s idea of the categorical imperative. I don’t know of any philosopher who thinks any one of those is a logically sound argument for anything. But they’re wonderful imagination grabbers, jungle gyms for the imagination. They structure the way you think about a problem. These are the real legacy of the history of philosophy” (“Intuition Pumps,” 182).

INTENTIONAL STANCE

How do animals use their brains to manipulate the environment around them to get what they need? What attitude, or *stance*, does an intelligent creature take toward the important objects in its surroundings? One of the influential contributions Daniel Dennett has made to the theory of mental content is detailed in his book *The Intentional Stance*. He sees three levels of thinking at work. At the most basic level, *the physical stance*, we think in terms of properties of matter and motion in order to predict what will happen. An arrow shot into the air will move in a gradual arc on its way to the target. An archer must aim higher to compensate. At another level, we think in terms of function or purpose. When we think that a bow is for shooting arrows, we have taken the *design stance* toward the bow. Of all the objects in an animal’s environment, possibly the most important are other animals. If a brain is adapted to take advantage of cause and effect in nature, then in what ways is it able to take advantage of the behavior of other intelligent agents? Dennett claims that humans and some other animals adopt what he calls “the intentional stance.” We have the ability to treat other things in the world as having beliefs, desires, and some degree of common sense. Will that animal want to attack me if I approach it? Is that person walking toward me a friend or a foe? The ability to answer these kinds of questions is clearly a valuable survival skill, though it is a matter of considerable debate just how much understanding a particular species has of its own behavior and the behavior of others.

The intentional stance is a deep and persistent aspect of human nature that is most poignantly encountered when we lose a loved one. During at least the first year of loss, individuals constantly encounter reminders of their loved one that can summon feelings of presence and intention: “He would have really laughed at that joke” or “She would have been mortified to have so many people paying a visit to her home.” The ability to maintain relationships persists even after the other party is no longer present. Of this ability Dennett says, “We preserve relics and other reminders of the deceased persons, and make images of them, and tell stories about them, to prolong these habits of mind even as they start to fade” (*Breaking the Spell*, 112). If we can

maintain a relationship with someone who is not present, the same ability surely allows us to have a relationship with someone who does not actually exist at all. The stories we humans tell, the relics we preserve, and the rituals we engage in can reinforce a sense of divine presence and intentionality that is of our own making. The intentional stance is deeply connected with the origin and nature of religion.

DESIGN WITHOUT A DESIGNER

Have you ever heard of a painting without a painter, a building without a builder, or a watch without a watchmaker? It seems so obvious that complicated things like paintings, buildings, and watches must have intelligent makers. What about living organisms? In his popular book of 1802, *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*, William Paley made the case that the breathtaking complexity seen in nature is evidence of an intelligent creator. In his younger years, Charles Darwin was initially “charmed and convinced” by Paley’s arguments, but the theory of evolution by natural selection ultimately painted a very different picture of how complexity and design actually arose in nature. Rather than appearing out of nowhere by divine fiat, living things, in all their impressive intricacy, have a history of development. The complexity we see today is a testament to the great age of life on Earth and the vast numbers of living things that have been sifted over time as part of the ongoing process of natural selection.

Many landmark scientific discoveries over the centuries have seemed counterintuitive. If the world is round, for example, why don’t people fall off the bottom? Indeed, the objective methods of science allow us to discover principles that sometimes run counter to our cherished notions of how the universe “should” work. Mostly, people have little problem accepting these paradoxical wonders in light of how science has been able to improve their lives. Evolution is different. In his *New York Times* editorial (August 28, 2005) entitled “Show Me the Science,” Dennett points out that “the fundamental idea of evolution by natural selection is not just mind boggling; natural selection, by executing God’s traditional task of designing and creating all creatures great and small, also seems to deny one of the best reasons we have for believing in God. So there is plenty of motivation for resisting the assurances of biologists.” The intelligent design movement, a modern version of Paley’s natural theology, posits that the elaborate machinery of life, as revealed by molecular biology, is evidence of an intelligent designer. But hypothesizing that a designer created something just because science has yet to work out the details is a far cry from a testable theory that makes serious predictions. “Indeed, no intelligent design hypothesis has even been ventured as a rival explanation of any biological phenomenon. . . . To date, the proponents of intelligent design have not produced anything like that. No experiments with

results that challenge any mainstream biological understanding. No observations from the fossil record or genomics or biogeography or comparative anatomy that undermine [*sic*] standard evolutionary thinking,” Dennett writes. So why the popularity of intelligent design? Rhetoric. One common ploy works like this: Misrepresent a scientist’s work. When an angry rebuttal appears in the literature, cite it as evidence that a genuine controversy exists worthy to be taught in school. There are plenty of legitimate controversies in biology, but until the intelligent design movement can muster serious scientific content behind its claims, in all fairness, it deserves little attention. “So get in line, intelligent designers,” says Dennett. “Get in line behind the hypothesis that life started on Mars and was blown here by a cosmic impact. Get in line behind the aquatic ape hypothesis, the gestural origin of language hypothesis and the theory that singing came before language, to mention just a few of the enticing hypotheses that are actively defended but still insufficiently supported by hard facts.”

In 2006, Daniel Dennett was rushed to the hospital for a life-threatening tear in the major vessel carrying blood from his heart. Remarkably, during a nine-hour surgery, doctors discovered that scar tissue from an earlier surgery had likely saved his life. Both critics and colleagues wondered if perhaps this experience would change Dennett’s outlook. “As I now enter a gentle period of recuperation, I have much to reflect on,” he wrote in an open letter entitled “Thank Goodness!” “Yes, I did have an epiphany. I saw with greater clarity than ever before in my life that when I say ‘Thank goodness!’ this is not merely a euphemism for ‘Thank God!’ (We atheists don’t believe that there is any God to thank.) I really do mean *thank goodness!* . . . It is a worthy recipient of the gratitude I feel today, and I want to celebrate that fact here and now.

“What, though, do I say to those of my religious friends (and yes, I have quite a few religious friends) who have had the courage and honesty to tell me that they have been praying for me? I have gladly forgiven them, for there are few circumstances more frustrating than not being able to help a loved one in any more direct way. I confess to regretting that I could not pray (sincerely) for my friends and family in time of need, so I appreciate the urge, however clearly I recognize its futility.”

—Daniel C. Dennett, “Thank Goodness!”

MEMES, MEMETICS, AND MEMEPLEXES

In the biological world, parents pass on genetic material with modifications to their children. Natural selection favors children with modifications that help

them survive and reproduce in their particular environment. This cycle of reproduction (transmission of genetic information) and selection over the course of billions of years has produced the vast thicket of complex life forms that we see today. But genetic material is not the only information that parents pass to the next generation. Human beings are natural imitators. Many things produced by humans can be thought of as replicas to be further copied and modified: words, songs, games, gestures, fashions, and even material artifacts. Is it meaningful to use the concepts of biological evolution, such as genes and natural selection, in an abstract way to talk about the development of things like human culture or religion?

It was Richard Dawkins who first introduced the concept of *memes* in his book *The Selfish Gene*. The word *meme*, which is meant to sound like the word *gene*, is an abbreviation of the Greek word *mimema*, meaning “something imitated.” A meme is a unit of cultural information that can be passed on by nongenetic means, though exactly what constitutes a unit of cultural information is still hotly debated. In simple terms, a meme can be thought of as an idea that gets transmitted from person to person. Daniel Dennett popularized the concept of memes starting in the late 1980s, and he remains one of its best-known proponents. In Dennett’s view, the process of evolution by natural selection is a general principle that can apply to things other than genes. All that is necessary is that those things be able to engage in three activities: replication, variation (mutation), and competition (differential fitness). In this general sense, evolution is said to be “substrate neutral.” In other words, it is a sort of universal principle. Consider, for example, chain letters. A person receives a letter containing the statement “Pass this on to twelve friends, and you will get good luck.” He copies the letter (replication) and sends it to his friends but adds a line or two of his own (variation). If a letter is not convincing, other people will not copy it and pass it on (differential fitness). The similarity of chain letters to biological evolution is striking, as one can even construct a family tree identifying common ancestors and mutations using methods originally developed for molecular biology (Bennett, Li, and Ma). In this continuous cycle of replication and selection, chain letters evolve, presumably competing for attention and credulity.

Religions, too, can be thought of as collections of catchy ideas and practices that are passed on from person to person. Just like chain letters, religions promise benefits to those who adopt their ways and pass on their ideologies, and they often warn of dire consequences to those who do not comply. Creedal statements, for example, are condensed collections of basic ideas that characterize a particular religious denomination. A collection of related memes passed together is a *memplex*.

An evolutionary view of religion raises interesting and controversial questions. What if a religion is like a virus? A virus infects a host by inserting rogue genes (think memplex) into the host’s DNA so that the host, in effect, becomes an unwitting factory that produces and spreads more virus. In this

case, religion acts like a *parasite*, offering no benefit to the practitioner. But Dennett suggests that there are also other possibilities observed in nature (*Breaking the Spell*, 84). Religions may be *mutualists*; that is, they may benefit the host as much as human beings benefit from the countless variety of bacteria that live in their gut. Alternatively, religions may simply be harmless sets of ideas that go along for the ride (*commensals*).

Just how useful is a generalized concept of evolution in understanding the development and spread of ideas and social practices like religion? *Memetics*, perhaps more than any other topic championed by Daniel Dennett, has attracted copious criticism from nearly as many biologists as theologians. Genes are not just a definition. They seem to have a well-defined physical basis as sequences of DNA that, when converted into discrete protein molecules, perform the functions necessary for life. Is there anything nearly this well defined underlying the meme? critics ask. Dennett concedes, "There is no single proprietary code, parallel to the four element code of DNA, that can be used to anchor meme-identity the way gene-identity can be anchored for most practical purposes. This is an important difference, but one of degree" (*Breaking the Spell*, 351). He also points out that the concept of a *gene* in biology is not as clearly defined as one might think ("The New Replicators," E83–E92). Indeed, with the discovery of alternative splicing (in which a single DNA sequence can produce more than one protein), RNA-based inheritance, and other similar phenomena, the precise meaning of *gene* is being revised. Still, from a reductionist's point of view, the concept of *genes* is informed by the underlying molecular biology and physics, an advantage that memes do not yet have. A physical basis for memes may well be discovered in the future, but it may not be necessary in order for memes to be a useful tool in the analysis of religions, chain letters, and other *replicators*. After all, the notion of *genes* arose long before the molecular basis of inheritance was understood.

Direct analogies to biology have been problematic. Another common criticism of memes is that while ideas may be altered as they are passed on (mutation), the form of alteration need not be random as it is in biology. Consider the case of chain letters again. A writer may intentionally modify the wording of the letter so that it spreads more effectively. In the eyes of biologists, such an occurrence is reminiscent of Lamarckian evolution (as commonly defined), an older, discredited theory in which traits acquired by parents during their lifetime were thought to be passed on to children. A parent giraffe that, for example, stretched and lengthened its neck by reaching for higher branches could pass on its lengthened neck to its offspring. Modern evolutionary theory, of course, displaced such explanations. Interestingly, Hull has argued that cultural evolution cannot be labeled as Lamarckian because memes play the role of genes, not characteristics (see also Hodgson and Knudsen). While Lamarckian evolution is evidently not compatible with biology (at least not mainstream biology), it is not necessarily ruled out as a means of evolution on other "substrates."

Other criticisms have been leveled at memes. Related groups of organisms that can no longer interbreed (different species) don't have a clear analogue in memetics. In fact, the free and unstructured exchange of ideas between different groups likely confuses the lines of descent, making ancestry difficult to determine. Without an "ecological" framework explaining which particular memes will be successful and which will not, memetics seems to be a circular definition, much as biological evolution was once thought to be by Karl Popper (Pigliucci). Dennett has answered many criticisms in *Darwin's Dangerous Ideas: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (see, for example, 355), but many open questions and serious debates remain. In spite of the challenges, some researchers have adopted a memetic approach; a peer-reviewed *Journal of Memetics* started in 1997 (www.jom-emit.org). Brown et al., in their book *The Origin of Music*, express the views of many researchers exploring memetics: "Let there be no confusion: cultural objects are not biological species, and cultural selection (according to cultural consequences) is not natural selection (according to reproductive consequences). However, the Darwinian mechanics of replication, variation, and selection can be thought of as operating in both spheres in a formally analogous fashion, thus making these theories both parsimonious and attractive" (3).

But how universal is this version of evolution put forward by Dennett? Possibly the boldest claims in this regard can be found in his book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. There, evolution has been put to work not only at the level of human culture, but also at the cosmological level. Much of the widely publicized and heated debate between Dennett and his critics (Stephen Jay Gould, H. Allen Orr, and others) centers on just what can and cannot be claimed for natural selection in biology and other contexts ("'Darwinian Fundamentalism': An Exchange"). In his essay "With a Little Help from My Friends" (Ross), Dennett responds to an essay by biologist Timothy Crowe, lamenting, "The problems of communication among evolutionary theorists continue to be severe, and . . . my own interventions have not achieved the clarifications I had sought. This is frustrating, but let's just try to fix it, locating the points of misunderstanding and ignoring the issue of who's to blame" (328). Perhaps some of the difficulty does lie in communication between philosophers, biologists, and social scientists in general. Though many hurdles remain for memetics to become a generally accepted framework for understanding nonbiological evolution, the interdisciplinary nature of the discussion may be an important step into the future.

ALL THE FREE WILL WORTH WANTING

If someone decides to go to the movies, or to buy something, or to take the scenic route home from work, that person would likely claim that he had just exercised his free will. He could easily have chosen not to go to the movies,

not to buy anything, or not to take the scenic route. That person was simply following his own internal desires. But was the decision *really* free? A saying often credited to the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer goes “You are free to do what you want, but you are not free to want what you want.” Aren’t we actually slaves to our wants? If so, what does it mean to be free? Philosophers, theologians, and scientists have debated this topic for centuries, and the various positions are often categorized around the concept of *determinism*.

Determinism is the view that every event or decision that happens in the present is determined by what has already happened in the past. This is a concept very familiar to scientists. The classical physics worked out by Sir Isaac Newton says that the future path of a material object like a planet is fully determined by the past through a set of unchanging laws, Newton’s laws of motion. Whether the universe is deterministic or not is far from settled. While classical physics operates under strictly deterministic rules, modern physics must conform to the strange and seemingly paradoxical rules of quantum mechanics, which, in some widely held interpretations, are non-deterministic. But quantum nondeterminism, according to Dennett, is of no help in settling the issue of free will. *Compatibilists* believe that determinism is true, but that free will can still exist. In other words, the two are compatible. *Incompatibilists* maintain that free will and determinism cannot coexist; one or the other must be false. Among incompatibilists, there are two main groups: Those who reject determinism are said to embrace *libertarian* (or *contracausal*) *free will*. Those who reject free will are said to embrace *hard determinism*.

Daniel Dennett tackles the subject of free will in two of his books. In *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting*, we are introduced to a curious case of digger wasps. A particular kind of wasp called *Sphex* raises its young in a protected nest within the ground. The wasp larvae feed on live but paralyzed insects deposited in the nest by the parent. A parent wasp will drag its prey to the mouth of the nest first and leave it there momentarily while it enters to inspect the nest. Once everything is in order, the wasp will emerge to retrieve the prey. Experimenters can move the prey a few inches away from the nest entrance while the wasp is inside, and when the wasp emerges something very curious happens. Finding its prey in a different location, the wasp will, once again, drag it to the mouth of the nest, leaving it outside momentarily while it enters to inspect. The behavior is repeated over and over if one moves the prey, without the wasp’s ever apparently realizing that it is caught in a mindless loop. It is as if wasp behavior is a fixed program that can be reset and rerun. We may wonder if humans are *ultimately* any different, but wasps do not appear to be free to alter their own behavior in the same way that humans can. The ability to recognize and avoid futility may be what most people mean when they think of free will. Dennett summarizes his position succinctly in his second book on the subject: “The hard determinists among

you may find in subsequent chapters that your considered view is that whereas free will—as you understand the term—truly doesn’t exist, something *rather like* free will does exist, and it’s just what the doctor ordered for shoring up your moral convictions, permitting you to make the distinctions you need to make. Such a soft landing for hard determinists is perhaps only terminologically different from *compatibilism*, the view that free will and determinism are compatible after all, the view that I am defending in this book” (*Freedom Evolves*, 98). Dennett further claims that “determinism is no threat to our most important thinking about possibilities and causes in our lives. . . . Determinism doesn’t imply that whatever we do, we could not have done otherwise, that every event has a cause, or that our natures are fixed” (*Freedom Evolves*, 62, 95). Indeed, free will seems to have important moral implications that make for emotionally charged arguments: If there is no free will, then how can we hold anyone responsible for her or his actions? Dennett-style compatibilism offers a middle way, in which free will is associated with control over one’s life, and people can be responsible for their actions in spite of determinism.

BRIGHT FUTURE

Daniel Dennett is one of the best-known members of the *brights movement*. The brights started in Sacramento, California, in 2003 as a social movement for persons embracing a naturalistic worldview, free from supernatural and mystical preconceptions. The term, coined by one of the founders, Paul Geisert, was intended to be a positive term that could serve as a big tent for atheists, humanists, secular humanists, freethinkers, rationalists, naturalists, skeptics, and even persons who maintain cultural ties to religion but do not embrace supernaturalism (www.the-brights.net/vision/faq.html#1). The movement obtained worldwide recognition when, within a few weeks of each other, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett each published widely read essays on the movement. “You may well be a bright,” says Dennett in his op-ed article for the *New York Times* entitled “The Bright Stuff”:

If not, you certainly deal with brights daily. That’s because we are all around you: we’re doctors, nurses, police officers, schoolteachers, crossing guards and men and women serving in the military. We are your sons and daughters, your brothers and sisters. Our colleges and universities teem with brights. Among scientists, we are a commanding majority. Wanting to preserve and transmit a great culture, we even teach Sunday school and Hebrew classes. Many of the nation’s clergy members are closet brights, I suspect. We are, in fact, the moral backbone of the nation: brights take their civic duties seriously precisely because they don’t trust God to save humanity from its follies.

There has been some resistance in the secular community to adopt the term *bright* on the grounds that it sounds somewhat conceited. Are people who are not brights, dim? In *Breaking the Spell*, Daniel Dennett defends the choice by comparing it to the word *gay*, which has been very successfully appropriated by society as a positive synonym for *homosexual*. “Those who are not gays are not necessarily glum; they’re straight. Those who are not brights are not necessarily dim” (*Breaking the Spell*, 21). Whether or not the brights label continues to grow and gain acceptance remains to be seen, but atheists, secular humanists, and other freethinkers appear to be a steadily growing constituency in the developed world.

“Is something sacred? Yes, say I with Nietzsche. I could not pray to it, but I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. The world is sacred. Does that make me an atheist? Certainly, in the obvious sense. If what you hold sacred is not any kind of Person you could pray to, or consider to be an appropriate recipient of gratitude (or anger, when a loved one is senselessly killed), you’re an atheist in my book.”

—Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (245).

DENNETT: THE BIG PICTURE

This overview of Daniel C. Dennett began with a look at his unique and humorous approach to philosophy and science: intuition pumps. The intentional stance shows us how our perception of the world is colored by our assumptions about intention and our nature as social beings. Memetics presents us with an evolutionary framework for possibly understanding a diverse set of social phenomena, including religion. It also has stimulated vigorous discussion between philosophers, biologists, and social scientists. Dennett’s brand of compatibilist free will provides a way of reconciling moral and ethical concerns in the face of science’s relentless pursuit of cause and effect. Many of his significant contributions to philosophy, such as his theories of consciousness and mental content, his landmark papers like “Evolution, Error, and Intentionality” (in *The Intentional Stance*), and his rejection of qualia, are simply beyond the scope of this introduction. Readers are strongly encouraged to visit his extensive full bibliography online (at the Tufts University Center for Cognitive Studies: <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/incbios/dennettd/dennettbiblio.htm>) and to sample more of his works. Dennett does not shy away from controversy and continues to challenge traditional views in philosophy, in science, and in society as a whole.

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John Dewey

John Shook

INTRODUCTION

The naturalistic and humanistic philosophy of John Dewey (1859–1952) was grounded in confidence in scientific methods and faith in religious ideals. Unlike many other twentieth-century atheists, Dewey was not hostile to religious experience, but he did demand that such experience be oriented toward human welfare in this world rather than anything supernatural. As a pragmatist, he required that anything “religious” have positive practical significance for life. Some pragmatists, such as William James, supposed that some beliefs in the divine could reasonably pass this practical test, quite apart from the concern that such beliefs cannot be reasonable from the scientific perspective. James was happy to let every belief system undergo the pragmatic test separately, applauding each and every success. This kind of pragmatism demotes coherence among practical systems to a secondary issue. Dewey refused to apply the pragmatic test in such a case-by-case manner, disapproving of a generous relativism that only superficially harmonizes science and religion.

Yet, instead of eliminating religion entirely, Dewey extracted the essence of faith to find visionary commitment to moral ideals rather than blind submission to jealous gods. Intelligently pursuing our ideals is all that Dewey asked of us: Scientific knowledge of the natural world is hardly an obstacle, but actually a necessary factor, for effective action. Any religion truly serious about making the greatest practical difference in humanity’s well-being must be naturalistic and therefore atheistic. Dewey’s philosophical religion was therefore naturalistic humanism—naturalistic enough to take scientific method seriously while humanistic enough to take faithful idealism seriously.

Dewey’s path to humanistic naturalism went through several stages of development. To understand his philosophical destination, we must look at

his journey. Born on October 20, 1859, in Burlington, Vermont, he received his BA from the University of Vermont in 1879 and his PhD in philosophy from Johns Hopkins University in 1884. From 1884 to 1894 Dewey taught philosophy at the University of Michigan, interrupted by a year at the University of Minnesota in 1888–1889. From 1894 to 1904, Dewey was professor and chair of the philosophy, psychology, and pedagogy department at the University of Chicago, and with his wife, Alice, he directed an experimental school of primary education. Dewey joined the philosophy faculty of Columbia University in 1905, teaching there until 1929, and actively advising students as emeritus professor until 1939. During his final years, Dewey continued to promote liberal democratic causes and organizations and he published significant political and philosophical writings. Dewey died on June 1, 1952, in New York City. At his death, he was acclaimed for having been America's foremost philosopher and public intellectual for many decades.

THE STAGES OF DEWEY'S RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Four stages in Dewey's attitude toward religion can be distinguished. The positive resolutions of each stage were retained in later stages, the result being a fair amount of continuity across his philosophical maturation toward atheism. Dewey's earliest religious attitudes were formed in a household dominated by his pious mother, whose strongly Calvinistic convictions urged personal salvation and moral rectitude. Relief from this oppressive atmosphere came from the intellectual life in his hometown. The Congregational church Dewey attended in Burlington was led by a liberal pastor endorsing universal salvation and rejecting biblical literalism and inerrancy. Some professors at the University of Vermont, which Dewey entered at age fifteen, similarly held theological views that emphasized social virtues attainable by everyone and moral ideals consistent with the democratic culture of America. This second stage's affirmation of democratic ideals was not yet consistent with the demanding revelations of an authoritarian God. Torn between two masters, the people's common intelligence and God's supreme dictates, Dewey searched for a philosophical solution. At Vermont he learned about the tradition of reasoned moral thinking from Plato to Kant, where each person's rational capacities could be sufficient for discovering the moral life. Could reason itself reconcile humanity and God?

Graduate school at Johns Hopkins University brought him under the tutelage of George S. Morris, whose philosophy of Hegelian idealism seemed to offer the sort of reconciliation Dewey sought. If God's mind was the ultimate and absolute reality, encompassing everything, including human minds, then no disastrous separation of God's reasons from human reasons could exist. The universe was like an organic body composed of cells (people) who together

help form the whole (God). Revelations and mythological stories are irrelevant; the religious life is not blind obedience to the past but thoughtful progress into the future. Viewing reality through the metaphor of a living organism then led to the application of biological concepts to philosophical issues. The evolutionary perspective began to take hold of Dewey's thought during the 1880s. The Hegelian view of historical evolution emphasizes that human rationality itself grows and improves over time. The Darwinian view of natural evolution reveals that the human brain and its capacities are the product of slow development over time. In this third stage, Dewey decisively favored people's common intelligence: God only supplies moral ideals of conduct, and people have the entire burden of learning how to actually fulfill these ideals in their daily lives. Morris's absolute idealism healed the dualisms (saved vs. damned, spirit vs. nature) of the strict Calvinism of Dewey's upbringing, confirming his preference for universal salvation and an identification of religious faith with moral commitment. During the 1890s, Dewey's sympathies placed him within the Social Gospel movement, especially concerning its demands for broadening democracy and strengthening social justice. He suggested that inclusive democracy must entirely replace exclusive churches, as churches are only repositories for outdated doctrines.

One problem remained: Was there anything left for God to do? By the mid-1890s, Dewey had decided that absolute idealism could not guide anyone toward moral progress, because God's moral perfection condemns all human efforts to complete failure. Religious ideals of moral conduct must be practical, offering helpful guidance for the growth of moral character. Dewey no longer needed belief in God personally; the family had ceased church attendance. No philosophical justification of God seemed possible, either. Never persuaded that any of the traditional arguments for God's existence had rational force, Dewey did not take them seriously. The religious life could not consist of the adoring affirmation of propositions about the divine; something has religious character only to the extent that it motivates and guides a person's general approach to living. One's practical commitment to moral ideals is one's religious commitment; God's actual existence is not required. To the objection that many people will commit to moral ideals only if they are sanctioned by a divine authority, Dewey's philosophy responds that accepting ideals on authority is contrary to morality, since such unthinking obedience is the abandonment of moral responsibility. The transition to the fourth and final stage of Dewey's attitude toward religion was the complete elimination of God and anything supernatural.

By the start of the twentieth century, Dewey had joined many religious humanists and religious naturalists in viewing any belief in the existence of a divine power as incompatible with naturalism and quite irrelevant to a genuinely religious life. Since neither a supernatural authority giving unquestionable commandments nor a spiritual absolute offering inscrutable perfection

could guide morality (and they really only obstructed genuine morality), Dewey concluded that liberal Christianity must logically proceed to democracy and atheism.

Dewey's atheism was philosophically sophisticated, naturally, as he continued to recommend "natural piety" toward the sources and supports of one's life. His understanding of and sympathy for religious experience developed in the context of his social psychology and pragmatic theory of knowledge. Rejecting the Cartesian notion of private mental states and isolated rationality, Dewey's evolutionary social psychology instead held that the habits of intelligence are learned by education and modified by further experience in group practices.

RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Three major dimensions of Dewey's social psychology shaped his mature philosophy and his treatment of the religious life. They are most explicitly developed in *Human Nature and Conduct* and *Experience and Nature*. First, experience is not subjectively private. Second, people's beliefs and knowledge are not subjective, either, but instead are functions of purposive behavior that have socially shared significance for group practices. Third, all knowledge arises from experience, and thought increases the meaningfulness of experience, producing knowledge. Dewey's empiricism held that the techniques of inference that increase the meaning that guides knowledge production (such as logic, mathematics, and scientific methodology) themselves gradually emerge from experience. For Dewey, both experience and knowledge were thoroughly goal-directed, social in nature, and cultural in significance. Dewey's philosophy could not take either the individual's "subjective" experience nor science's "objective" knowledge as more capable of revealing reality or somehow independent of all-embracing culture. Religion in Dewey's philosophy was similarly treated as an evolving social phenomenon that cannot be evaluated without a consideration of its role in cultural development. The philosophical evaluation of any human practice must be pragmatic, according to Dewey.

Dewey's functional psychology implies a pragmatist theory of knowledge. If all beliefs exist to serve the pursuit of practical goals (and not to match some idealized vision of "truth"), then beliefs are evaluated, in experiments, by how much they contribute to successful behavior. Older theories of knowledge assumed that meaningful mental entities can be easily identified (by the power of reflection?) and compared with the portion of reality to which they refer. Such theories must depict both mind and reality statically, implicitly presuming that an isolated internal mental entity has some magical power to perfectly select the part or aspect of reality that it is trying to represent. However, since 1900, scientific psychology has been dynamic, not static. No scientifically respectable psychology remains to endorse the possibility of the sort of

comparison required by a correspondence theory of knowledge. All that remains from medieval and Cartesian rationalism is the correspondence theory of truth, but its remaining defenders happily admit that their theory does nothing to actually assist in increasing knowledge. Since pragmatism is primarily a theory of how we increase knowledge, its complaint against truth as correspondence amounts to pointing out its uselessness.

In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey explained the regrettable attractions of the notion of absolute truth and how modern science had replaced it. Pragmatists understand truth in accordance with their theory of knowledge. Dewey's pragmatic theory of knowledge is fallibilistic, for it is possible to have knowledge now that later must be modified or replaced by new knowledge. Roughly, knowledge is scientifically justified belief. Truth is an irrelevant criterion, and therefore no Gettier-style problems arise for pragmatism because they all require scenarios in which current knowledge is compared unfavorably with some absolute truth. Dewey rarely used the term *truth* with approval and was most comfortable instead labeling as "truths" everything currently known. Dewey heard Charles Sanders Peirce's definition of truth as that ideal limit of communal scientific inquiry while a student at Johns Hopkins and had no objection. The closest approach that a pragmatist can make to absolute truth is to assign such truth to propositions that are known by some inquirer, present or future, and that would never be overturned if all possible inquiries were exhausted. The notion of truths (or some kinds of realities) existing forever beyond possible inquiry is not endorsed by pragmatism, although pragmatism offers no conclusive argument for their nonexistence.

"Men have gone on to build up vast intellectual schemes, philosophies, and theologies, to prove that ideals are real not as ideals but as antecedently existing actualities. They have failed to see that in converting moral realities into matters of intellectual assent they have evinced lack of moral faith. Faith that something should be in existence as far as lies in our power is changed into the intellectual belief that it is already in existence. When physical existence does not bear out the assertion, the physical is subtly changed into the metaphysical. In this way, moral faith has been inextricably tied up with intellectual beliefs about the supernatural."

—John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 16

Pragmatism is a serious effort to understand and improve on scientific method, as the best way yet invented for increasing reliable knowledge. However, pragmatists, including Dewey, refused to assign science the unique responsibility of determining what really exists; reality, including experienceable reality, contains far more than what the sciences could ever know about.

Dewey's pragmatism and preference for science should not be interpreted as a commitment to scientific reductionism or materialism. Dewey's broadly pluralistic naturalism thus practically amounts to a stern denial of supernaturalisms and ontological dualisms. Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* develops his theory of scientific method. Unlike Peirce in his narrow attention to the natural sciences, Dewey believed that scientific inquiry's fundamentally creative and experimental method could be applied to all human problems, including moral and political problems. Natural science's conclusions could not erect a new morality, but the scientific method of inquiry itself can be applied to any problematic situation in which current knowledge was unable to resolve doubt about what to do. Of course, our appreciation of our current situation is guided by a vast knowledge base, including principles that emphasize relevant features of the situation and suggest the best course of action. Inquiry first tries to apply that knowledge base to a problem; failure indicates that further inquiry must experimentally modify the knowledge base.

Dewey's *How We Think* provides his general account of the processes of learning through inquiry. In natural science, this learning eventually implies modifications of theories, while in morality or politics it implies modifications to moral or political norms. Rejecting the Humean instrumentalist model of reasoning, Dewey understood the scientific method as capable of pragmatically evaluating both the means and the ends of actions in light of their further consequences (see his *Theory of Valuation*). Consideration of the means necessary to an end, or of the future consequences of achieving that end, is a reevaluation of that end's value and desirability. Nothing can be immune from such reasoned consideration, and therefore no end or good can be declared supreme, final, or all-inclusive. Instead, the moral and political life requires the constant renegotiation of shifting priorities among innumerable goals, values, and norms.

THE ROLE OF DEMOCRACY

For Dewey, the scientific method applied to society is democracy. Like science, which proceeds through distributed intelligence among cooperating inquirers, democracy is the way of life in which mutually respectful citizens intelligently deliberate on their common social problems. *Democracy and Education* is Dewey's fullest statement of the essential role that scientific, moral, and civic education must play in a democracy. Dewey also sketched a theory of political democracy about the government that would best serve a democratic community. *The Public and Its Problems* and *Liberalism and Social Action* develop his theory of "publics," that is, groups of people with common problems trying to modify social or political norms for remedies. These publics are educated in the skills of cooperative deliberation from schooling and past experience, and they compete for attention from elected officials and from the whole

community with the help of social scientists and other experts. Publics naturally dissolve when their problems are alleviated, and people's energies are redirected to other problems. Against aristocratic theories of democracy, which assign to the government and experts the responsibility for recognizing and solving social problems, Dewey expected greater citizenship skills from the masses so that they could do more than just vote periodically. Of course, if each person by himself or herself is expected to help with every one of a country's problems, faith in democracy seems hopelessly utopian. However, Dewey explained how ordinary people, as well as voting, can devote some measure of time, energy, and intelligence to a few serious problems affecting them, and thus publics can be energized. Prominent examples include unions and civic organizations; national societies such as the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Dewey was a cofounder of both), and the National Rifle Association; industry associations; and every sort of lobbying and special-interest group imaginable. If a democracy can promote both the free formation of effective publics and the caring responsiveness of the whole body of citizens, then Dewey envisioned progress toward the ideal "Great Community." Democracy is the form of community life and government that respects and peacefully promotes universal moral respect and empowers its citizens through education for the civic capacities of moral deliberation. As a regulative ideal, the notion of a Great Community helps to expose immorality and injustice and to suggest remedies for transforming society.

Dewey departed further from traditional liberalism because he argued that to be full citizens, people require more than John Locke's negative rights and liberties. The right to fair and safe employment (not just a right to individual property), to education in the skills of citizenship (not merely free speech), and to toleration and protection of ethnic heritage (not cultural assimilation and hegemony) are among the additional empowering rights justified in a healthy democracy. Dewey's *Ethics*, written with James H. Tufts, provides a detailed theory of economic and social justice that owes much to both the liberal tradition and utilitarianism, and especially to John Stuart Mill, although Dewey sometimes preferred the label "social utilitarianism," since most goods are socially shared goods. Dewey was a democratic socialist, since he favored strong democratic intervention in the economic sphere to prevent injustice, but he was never a communist, since he rejected communism's use of violence and preferred restrained capitalism to state ownership of all industry. Like many liberal progressives, Dewey instead expected strong unions and other types of effective publics to be able to peacefully negotiate for the things needed for greater social justice.

For Dewey, the understanding of democracy as a moral community implied noncoercive deliberation to resolve conflicts. Dewey's demand that violence be only an absolute last resort linked him with pacifists such as Jane Addams, who also demanded that governments should engage in international

cooperation to prevent conditions provoking war. Dewey's other major concern was that wars are extremely hazardous to a democracy's civil liberties. Dewey, like later communitarians, viewed people as deeply connected to a variety of social groups. He recommended an inclusive cultural pluralism in which people possess group membership while being free to enjoy and adopt other groups' ways. The morality that should be taught in public schools (private schooling encourages antidemocratic tendencies) consists of the civic virtues of respect for the equal dignity of all, cooperative group problem solving, and loyalty to the ideals and aims of democracy. The only intolerance innate in Dewey's democracy is the rejection of groups that claim to possess absolute moral norms and values that prevent their members from following democratic civic virtues and incapacitate them for cooperative public deliberation. Democracy requires a somewhat flexible and experimental attitude toward even our most cherished moral norms and values, because a few may require modification during our lifetime to permit the alleviation of serious social problems. Even Dewey's own specific formulations of the civic virtues and basic rights were advanced tentatively, and he expected them to be gradually modified in the future. The principle that seems the most absolute in Dewey's philosophy, the standard by which he undertook moral and political criticism, is the demand that all persons have an equal opportunity to realize their capacities and enjoy life in a manner consistent with the greater social good. However, even this principle remained flexible for Dewey, since the practical meaning of "realizing one's capacities" would change in the future as the possibilities of human experience expanded.

THE SOCIAL NATURE OF RELIGION

Understanding Dewey's conception of the social nature of religion is essential to a full comprehension of his pragmatist and democratic alternative to religions and supernatural gods. A pragmatist might, as most did, take the easy option of naturalistic and humanistic atheism. Such pragmatists would simply wait for notions of the divine to become completely absorbed into social ethics and would anticipate the coming day when impractical "God talk" completely faded away. Dewey decided not to be this type of pragmatist. He eloquently expressed his high valuation of religious experience, once it is liberated from supernaturalism, in most of his major works. Unlike fellow pragmatist William James, whose mysticism found divinely inspiring powers present at the fringes of individual consciousness, Dewey required that religious and moral experience and belief have only social significance. Therefore religious experience could only consist of one's communion with others in expressions of commitment (through group practices) to social values.

What was Dewey's pragmatist alternative to a supernatural God? As early as 1892, Dewey concluded that a liberal, nonsupernatural Christianity was

best for America. This liberal Christianity was still Christianity because the American community would still hold Jesus to be an exemplary moral figure of love. For Dewey, the example of mutual love and respect for all people was simultaneously Christian and democratic, and democracy's progress was Christian progress. In the 1890s Dewey also asserted that Jesus offered no specific rules, doctrines, or creeds and thus left no church. The preferred alternative to churches and their religions of fixed truth was the "continual revelation" of new truths about how to fulfill the ideal of love, which would arise from the process of democracy itself.

After these early pronouncements, Dewey was largely silent on the historical figure of Jesus, but he did remain hostile toward churches. In *A Common Faith*, Dewey's distinction between religions (the churches' doctrines) and the religious (those liberated into pluralistic and progressive democracy) reemphasized his claim that the democratic experience was also religious experience. The religious were those who had escaped supernaturalism and sectarian creeds and could join in the aesthetic appreciation of the pursuit of democracy. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey found paradigms of aesthetic experience in communal practices devoted to ideals. In *A Common Faith*, Dewey again appealed to the coextensive aesthetic/religious experience of pursuing ideals. He believed that the democratic commitment to moral respect for all people had the quality of a religious faith, and that a democratic culture, like any culture, should possess a religion as a unifying social force diffused throughout all cultural activities. Dewey concluded that democracy is the form of life in which the shared aesthetic enjoyment of the democratic community life is collectively of great value, and that this communion is a kind of highly valuable religious experience.

In *A Common Faith* the notion of natural piety again plays a role. Dewey identified the object of natural piety as the organic unity of human strivings with cooperating natural forces. A democracy should likewise encourage this natural piety, and religious devotion is thus properly oriented toward human/environment relationships as well as human/human relationships. To the surprise of many, especially Dewey's humanist colleagues, he went further, controversially offering the label of *God* for the object of religious experience. Critics have pointed out that the name *God* at least implies a unified and purposive agency and perhaps a personality as well, signaling a retreat to older religious notions that Dewey himself rejected. Most philosophers and speculative theologians who have pursued Dewey's suggestions toward a naturalistic and humanistic religion remain quite wary of such labels as *God*. However, the task remains to explain how the sort of intense religious devotion to ideals, still useful in any democracy, can be aroused and maintained without a trespass on the boundaries set by naturalism.

Dewey's mature views on religion are a prominent illustration of how he remained indebted to Hegel throughout his long career. By locating the divine within the human/nature relationship, Dewey's theory of the divine represents

a pragmatic development of the Hegelian absolute, which Dewey had sought early in his career. At this early time, assisted by his understanding of Hegel, Dewey held that it was Christianity's proper destiny to make its final transformation into liberal democracy. Decades later, in *A Common Faith*, Dewey supplemented this theory by applying the label of *God* to indicate the holistic way in which certain aspects of nature function to support humanity's goals. Dewey approached God in a thoroughly functional and pragmatic way. This approach is evident in his pragmatic tactic of converting nouns into adjectives and then into adverbs. For example, he preferred to talk of "true hypotheses" rather than "the truth," and his greatest preference was simply to speak of "hypotheses that work truly."

This pragmatic appeal to adverbial description works well for Dewey's philosophy of religion. Rather than talking directly about the divine, Dewey described an aspect of nature as being divine and then preferred to talk about nature behaving divinely. Under what conditions would human beings understand nature as behaving divinely? In 1929, Dewey wrote, in *The Quest for Certainty*, about how nature is idealizable when it is regarded as a potential aid in realizing human ideals. But idealization must be carefully understood. In all his works, Dewey explicitly refused to endorse any conception of God that made God responsible for guaranteed ideals and preserved values. In *The Quest for Certainty* Dewey said that people take the religious perspective when they appreciate how humanity, together with its cooperating environment, creates a larger whole having intertwined human and divine characteristics. It only remained for Dewey, in *A Common Faith* five years later, to permit himself to use the term *God* to label the direction toward which one's religious attitude is oriented.

The best way to understand Dewey's long path to his acceptance of the term *God* is to examine more closely his appreciation of the kind of religious experience that he labeled, perhaps inspired by George Santayana, "natural piety." By 1934, Dewey was stating that God is not just another object inside or outside nature. God *is* nature, when nature is understood as the complex whole of "environment-humanity." In this conception of the divine, the divine would not exist without humanity, and humanity would not exist without the divine. The religious experience is a mature appreciation of this mutual dependency and mutual destiny. Dewey occasionally called this experience "natural piety" in several of his important writings. Natural piety is prominent in *A Common Faith*, as this quotation displays:

Our successes are dependent upon the cooperation of nature. The sense of the dignity of human nature is as religious as is the sense of awe and reverence when it rests upon a sense of human nature as a cooperating part of a larger whole. Natural piety is not of necessity either a fatalistic acquiescence in natural happenings or a romantic idealization of the world. It may rest upon a just sense of nature as the whole of which we are parts, while it also recognizes that we are

parts that are marked by intelligence and purpose, having the capacity to strive by their aid to bring conditions into greater consonance with what is humanly desirable. Such piety is an inherent constituent of a just perspective in life. (18)

Dewey explicitly connected the religious attitude of piety with religious attitude of faith. By noticing that these two religious attitudes are distinct but also connected, Dewey attempted to distinguish his own position on religion. In the quotation above from *A Common Faith*, Dewey said that natural piety is neither a fatalism nor an idealism. Natural piety is directed toward the enviroing conditions that partially control, together with human effort, both success and failure. Fatalism, whether arising from theological predestination or materialistic determinism, dismisses human effort as ultimately irrelevant to whatever values may be realized. Idealism similarly has no significant role for human effort, since its romantic orientation toward ideals is admirable yet irrelevant to the guaranteed existence of the ideals. Indeed, from Dewey's perspective, fatalism and idealism are united by their common conviction on the impotence of human effort. Fatalism emphasizes that tragedy cannot be avoided, recommends passive stoicism toward whatever happens in the practical world, and accuses the romantic of false faith in nonexistent ideals. On its side, idealism emphasizes that the human spirit can rise above tragedy, recommends passionate conviction about things outside the practical world, and accuses the fatalist of ignorance about supernatural values. Ultimately, both fatalism and idealism lead to moral quietism, that is, a resignation to the fact that no human effort can make a moral difference. Both fatalism and idealism sharply separate faith from human effort: For both, faith should intensify precisely when one's concern with practical affairs must fade.

Dewey's philosophy of religion, opposed to both fatalism and idealism, instead holds that faith in ideals is only appropriate where it energizes one's efforts with practical affairs. Of course, our practical efforts will fail more often than not; yet devotion to ideals is religious because frequent failure does not extinguish one's devotion. If disappointment with practical efforts instead dominates, natural piety could degenerate into either submissive prostration before the all-powerful, or aesthetic absorption with the good, true, and beautiful (or both combined, as in the later writings of Santayana). These degenerate forms of natural piety are not genuinely religious, according to Dewey, no matter how many religions have encouraged them. The only form of natural piety that deserves to be respected as religious is a natural piety toward that sphere of nature/human engagement in which ideals are partially and gradually realizable despite temporary setbacks and ultimate catastrophe.

The frequently heard accusation that Dewey failed to acknowledge the tragic and hence failed to appreciate religion's power, is made in ignorance of Dewey's sophisticated treatment of religious experience. Dewey is labeled an "optimist" by those fixated on tragedy, as if he were assured of the eventual

victory of human trials, but no such assurance ever appears in his writings. Not only did Dewey eloquently attest to the tragic, but furthermore, only an approach like Dewey's is capable of an intelligent appreciation of the full reality of tragedy. Admirers of the tragic who want to go in a quite different direction have only fatalism or idealism to choose from; both paths fail to do justice to a genuine religious faith in ideals.

According to Dewey, although the religious do not believe in any supernatural gods, since they take no comfort in guarantees, the religious are faithful to what is really important: the ideals themselves. As Dewey complained to liberal theologians still seeking a righteous God, either we find God and then commit ourselves to whatever he instructs, or we use our prior commitments to ideals to judge which sort of god ought to exist. The first option assumes a sudden ability to forget one's morality and values whenever one thinks that a god approaches (an ability that one should want neither for oneself nor for one's neighbors). The second option is a frank admission that we are constructing a useless god: If we already have a strong religious commitment to ideals in the first place, adding a god is, at minimum, superfluous and could potentially lead to the moral quietism of idealism. Dewey wrote:

If you appeal to the moral life for your basis and direction, you must be content to derive your conceptions of religion and of God wholly from the implications of the moral life. The question whether there is some physical or metaphysical, some existential, extraneous power working for the realization of moral demands and ideals, is totally irrelevant. To appeal to the supremacy of moral ideals as the ground for the content of religious ideas, including that of God, and then to insist upon a God to give moral ideals external and independent support involves an inherent contradiction. ("A God or The God?" 218)

By this argument, liberal theology must therefore logically proceed to atheism.

Of course, Dewey realized that his dilemma for liberal theologians applied to himself as well. In *A Common Faith* Dewey did not offer a useless god. While Dewey's God neither commands moral rules nor guarantees the preservation of ideals, this God has a pragmatic meaning in the living faith of those who are devoted to ideals in a hazardous universe. Dewey first offered the label of *God* to indicate a set of coordinated ideals to which a person has the highest devotion. While somewhat different for each person, coordinated ideals are unified for an individual in a double sense: These ideals are mutually adjusted to each other, so that the pursuit of one ideal does not demand the violation of another (although an ideal may never be entirely fulfilled if considered in abstract and separate from the rest—e.g., pure justice is not possible where love for children is involved). A person's ideals are also unified in the sense that devotion to them brings that person closer to having a unified self.

"Dewey found nothing religious in the slack security of divine guarantees, leaving nothing for people to strive for; the only religious faith worth having is faith in ourselves. He wrote, 'Faith in the continued disclosing of truth through directed cooperative human endeavor is more religious in quality than is any faith in a completed revelation.'"

—*A Common Faith*, 18

However intriguing this conception of God may be, Dewey soon revised it:

But this idea of God, or of the divine, is also connected with all the natural forces and conditions—including man and human association—that promote the growth of the ideal and that further its realization. We are in the presence neither of ideals completely embodied in existence nor yet of ideals that are mere rootless ideals, fantasies, utopias. For there are forces in nature and society that generate and support the ideals. They are further unified by the action that gives them coherence and solidity. It is this active relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name "God." (*A Common Faith*, 29)

Here Dewey depicts a God consisting of the organic whole of human strivings and those portions of nature supporting those strivings. This view of God is neither pantheism nor panentheism, as some Dewey critics and commentators have supposed, since much of the universe will always be coldly indifferent and irrelevant to life. But since part of nature is part of God, Dewey's God is far more than merely one's personal ideals: If this God were only those, it would be a personal God indeed! To be religious, people must experience a relationship with something beyond themselves. Few would dispute this observation. However, Dewey's God exists only because the faithful exist, a position that obviously contravenes supernaturalism. Yet the God/human relationship was, after all, designed by Dewey to ensure that God would be conceived of as living within a social relationship with humanity. In social relationships, people play mutual roles: A person is my friend because I am her friend; that person is my father because I am his son; and so forth.

Dewey's God has objective existence, since nature/humanity relations are objectively real and recognizable even by those uninterested in being religious themselves. Dewey's God can be studied and understood, although it will not be the same thing for all people. A close analogy is available in aesthetics, that is, the study of how peoples have used horticulture and terraforming to create elaborate gardens and landscapes in accord with their ideals of beauty. Nature is obviously involved as an active (though unaware) collaborator in such human efforts, and the ideals of gardeners are also available for study (even by those who dislike gardening themselves), since these ideals become evident through an understanding and appreciation of the purpose of the work. Furthermore, a

gardener can enjoy a richly satisfying (while often frustrating!) relationship with nature through gardening, not diminished by the fact that nature's beauty is elicited only through the application of the gardener's own ideals of beauty.

Dewey was well aware that applying "God" to his conception of the object of religious devotion would inevitably arouse controversy. The liberal Dewey was not going to get sidetracked by names for the divine. He sought an idea of God that is, at minimum, implied by and embedded within all the world's religions. The resulting conception of God is both naturalistic and idealistic. But why use the term *God*? Dewey apparently intended to steal the term away from the supernaturalists, while simultaneously trying to distance his religious views from the views of those who want nothing to do with religion. In *A Common Faith*, Dewey explicitly rejected "militant atheism." He explained:

One reason why personally I think it fitting to use the word "God" to denote that uniting of the ideal and actual which has been spoken of, lies in the fact that aggressive atheism seems to me to have something in common with traditional supernaturalism. I do not mean merely that the former is mainly so negative that it fails to give positive direction to thought, though that fact is pertinent. What I have in mind especially is the exclusive preoccupation of both militant atheism and supernaturalism with man in isolation. For in spite of supernaturalism's reference to something beyond nature, it conceives of this earth as the moral centre of the universe and of man as the apex of the whole scheme of things. It regards the drama of sin and redemption enacted within the isolated and lonely soul of man as the one thing of ultimate importance. Apart from man, nature is held either accursed or negligible. Militant atheism is also affected by lack of natural piety. The ties binding man to nature that poets have always celebrated are passed over lightly. The attitude taken is often that of man living in an indifferent and hostile world and issuing blasts of defiance. A religious attitude, however, needs the sense of a connection of man, in the way of both dependence and support, with the enveloping world that the imagination feels is a universe. Use of the words "God" or "divine" to convey the union of actual with ideal may protect man from a sense of isolation and from consequent despair or defiance. (36)

For John Dewey to repudiate "militant atheism," when he himself was widely regarded as one of the world's staunchest and controversial atheists, exposes how his philosophical naturalism was designed to accommodate an earnest and practical humanism. People need ideals to live well, and no naturalism that denies the reality or effectiveness of ideals can be credible in the long run. Nor could Dewey form an alliance with those who preferred the misleading compromise offered by shallow agnosticism. He complained:

"Agnosticism" is a shadow cast by the eclipse of the supernatural. Of course, acknowledgment that we do not know what we do not know is a necessity of all intellectual integrity. But generalized agnosticism is only a halfway elimination of the supernatural. Its meaning departs when the intellectual outlook is directed

wholly to the natural world. When it is so directed, there are plenty of particular matters regarding which we must say we do not know; we only inquire and form hypotheses which future inquiry will confirm or reject. But such doubts are an incident of faith in the method of intelligence. They are signs of faith, not of a pale and impotent skepticism. We doubt in order that we may find out, not because some inaccessible supernatural lurks behind whatever we can know. The substantial background of practical faith in ideal ends is positive and outreaching. (57)

Dewey's humanistic naturalism has much in common with John Stuart Mill's search for a "Religion of Humanity." Dewey's concluding sentences of *A Common Faith* echo Mill's call for a religious humanism that is truly centered on people's potential to take responsibility for, and deserved pride in, the future welfare of all humanity:

The ideal ends to which we attach our faith are not shadowy and wavering. They assume concrete form in our understanding of our relations to one another and the values contained in these relations. We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared than we have received it. Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class, or race. Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant. (57–58)

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Albert Einstein

Mauro Murzi

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

Albert Einstein, the most influential physicist of the twentieth century and “Person of the Century” according to *Time* magazine, was born on March 14, 1879, in Ulm, a city in the south of Germany. His parents, Hermann Einstein and Pauline Koch, were not observant Jews. In the year following his birth, Einstein’s family moved to Munich, where the young Albert attended the public elementary school and the Luitpold Gymnasium. In 1894 his parents moved to Italy and lived in Milan and Pavia with their daughter, Maja (born in 1881), while Albert stayed in Munich to continue his studies. He was so upset by his loneliness that in the following year, he abandoned the gymnasium without graduating, to rejoin the family. After failing to be admitted to the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule (ETH; Federal Institute of Technology) in Zurich, he finished secondary school in Aarau in 1896. On his second attempt at admission, Einstein entered the ETH and graduated in 1900. The following year he became a Swiss citizen (he had renounced German citizenship in 1896 and for five years had been stateless).

The year 1902 was a critical one for Einstein: In January he had a child with Mileva Marić (they married in 1903); in June he began working at the Federal Office for Intellectual Property in Bern, having failed to gain a professorship at the ETH; in October his father died bankrupt in Milan. The work at the Federal Office for Intellectual Property did not engage him fully, and during his spare time Einstein wrote several papers on theoretical physics, which he submitted to the renowned journal *Annalen der Physik*. The five papers contributed in 1905 are so important in the history of physics that 1905 is called Einstein’s annus mirabilis (miracle year). These articles dealt with the determination of molecular dimensions, Brownian motion, the

hypothesis of light quanta, the special theory of relativity, and energy-mass equivalence.

Only in 1908 did the academic establishment begin to recognize Einstein's scientific competence. In that year he was appointed Privatdozent at the University of Bern; in 1909, associate professor at the University of Zurich; in 1911, full professor at the University of Prague; and in 1912, professor at the ETH. After his return to Germany in 1914, he taught at the University of Berlin. In 1919 he became world-famous because his prediction of the bending of light in a gravitational field—a consequence of the general theory of relativity—was confirmed by observation of the apparent position of stars during a solar eclipse. In that year Einstein divorced Mileva Marić (they had three children) and married his cousin Elsa Löwenthal.

In 1922 Einstein was awarded the Nobel Prize “for his services to Theoretical Physics, and especially for his discovery of the law of the photoelectric effect.” Einstein's Nobel lecture was dedicated to relativity theory, although his Nobel Prize award did not mention relativity theory, only his discoveries in quantum physics. In 1933, when Hitler became chancellor of Germany, Einstein was a visiting professor in the United States; he did not return to Germany and, after a brief stay in Belgium and England, accepted a professorship at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey, where he remained until his death. In 1940 he became an American citizen (he also preserved his Swiss citizenship). In 1952 he declined the offering of the Presidency of the State of Israel. Einstein died on April 17, 1955, of an aortic aneurysm.

SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS

The list of Einstein's scientific contributions is astonishing. The theory of relativity has utterly changed our conception of space and time, not only from a scientific viewpoint, but also from a philosophical viewpoint. Among the many consequences of relativity theory are energy-mass equivalence, the retardation of moving clocks, the deflection of light by gravity, the explanation of the anomalous precession of the perihelion of Mercury, and the effect of gravitational lenses. Einstein utilized the equations for the gravitational field to build a model of a finite but unlimited static universe characterized by a repulsive force that finds expression in the so-called cosmological constant and thus initiated the field of contemporary cosmology. He contributed greatly to the development of quantum physics, working on the determination of molecular dimensions, Brownian motion, the photoelectric effect, the stimulated emission of light, the wave-particle duality of light, and the Bose-Einstein statistics.

Einstein's notoriety moved many people to attack relativity theory, which became the preferred target of several philosophers, amateurs, and professional scientists. The attacks intensified with the advent of Nazism, when the German

physicists affiliated with the Deutsche Physik movement denied the validity of relativity theory. Einstein is attacked even today, though for different reasons: Accusations of plagiarism are not unusual, and his theories are ascribed to other persons, such as Henri Poincaré, Hendrik Lorentz, David Hilbert, and Einstein's first wife, Mileva Marić. The source of many of these attacks is personal aversion, to which sometimes is added a prejudice against Einstein's Jewish origins.

Einstein fought a long, solitary battle against the most common interpretation of quantum mechanics, which regards the goal of describing the world of microphysics by means of exact causal laws as an impossible task. Einstein was a firm supporter of the necessity of employing deterministic laws in every field of physics. In his opinion, the probabilistic nature of the quantum mechanical description of microphysics was due to the inherent incompleteness of quantum mechanics. He designated a thought experiment, now called EPR (from Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen, the three authors of the paper in which it is described), to prove this incompleteness. Years later EPR has become one of the most dramatic examples of the deep complexity of quantum theories and can be regarded as the first proof of the nonlocal character of quantum mechanics.

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Einstein's thoughts about religion and its relationship to science are expressed in several short papers, written for different occasions and partially collected in *Out of My Later Years* and *Mein Weltbild* (an English translation, with addenda and revisions, was divided into two books, *The World as I See It* and *Ideas and Opinions*). Especially interesting are the three papers "Religion and Science," published in the *New York Times* in 1930; "Science and Religion," which consists of two parts, the first one being the text of a discourse that Einstein gave at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1939, and the second being a contribution to a symposium about science, philosophy, and religion in 1941; and "Religion and Science: Irreconcilable?" published in the *Christian Register* in 1948. In these papers, whose main subject is the relationship between science and religion, Einstein denied the existence of an insurmountable antagonism between science and religion and claimed that their conflict is more apparent than substantial. Another interesting source is the 1931 article "The World as I See It," in which Einstein stated his disbelief in a personal God and the immortality of soul and explained that he could be considered "a deeply religious man" (*Ideas and Opinions*, 12) only because true religiosity is "the knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate" (11–12) and is the emotion arising from the experience of mystery, an emotion that "stands at the cradle of true art and true science" (11). In this particular sense of the term *religious*, doing science is a deeply religious activity.

Hence we can understand why Einstein said that “serious scientific workers are the only profoundly religious people” (43) and why, in the short 1934 paper “The Religious Spirit of Science,” he wrote that the religious feeling of scientists derives from “amazement at the harmony of natural law” (43), which reveals a superior intelligence. This intelligence, however, acts only by means of strictly deterministic causal laws, which prohibit the interference of supernatural forces. There is no room for God’s miracles, and thus there is no room for a personal God, who punishes and rewards his creatures; moreover, there is no use for a class of priests acting as intermediaries between God and people.

What is the method of science? The letter that Einstein wrote to Maurice Solovine on May 7, 1952, contains the best description, in my opinion, of Einstein’s conception of scientific method. In this letter, in four concise and clear paragraphs, Einstein explained the interaction between experience and theory. First, there are the experiences. Second, there are the axioms of the scientific theory; there is no logical law that permits one to deduce the axioms from the experiences—at most, there is a psychological connection. Third, from the axioms we can deduce particular statements. Fourth, we control these particular statements by confronting them with the experiences. The most important point is that there is no logical connection between the experiences and the concepts occurring in the axioms and in the particular statements. Einstein had already expressed this conception in a 1936 paper about physics and reality (“Physik und Realität,” reprinted in *Out of My Later Years* and in *Ideas and Opinions*), where he said that the concepts are not identical with the totality of sense impressions, but are arbitrary creations of the human mind, logically independent from sense experiences. The justification of a scientific theory resides only in the success of the results: there is no inductive justification, because the theory does not logically derive from the experiences.

“I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures, or has a will of the kind that we experience in ourselves. Neither can I nor would I want to conceive of an individual that survives his physical death; let feeble souls, from fear or absurd egoism, cherish such thoughts. I am satisfied with the mystery of the eternity of life and with the awareness and a glimpse of the marvelous structure of the existing world, together with the devoted striving to comprehend a portion, be it ever so tiny, of the Reason that manifests itself in nature.”

—Albert Einstein, *Ideas and Opinions*, 12

According to Einstein, there is no contrast between science and religion if each is properly intended. Science is the study of what is; thus it cannot determine

what should be. This latter task—which embraces the search for the fundamental ends and values of human life, and for the foundation of ethical principles—is the subject matter of religion. The scope of religion is different and independent from the scope of science and includes value judgments, which are outside the domain of scientific reasoning. The fundamental aim of religion is to ground ethical principles and to search for the ends and values of life. There is no rational justification for ethics and for ends and values; indeed, there is no need for such a rational justification. Then what is the source of their authority? We must sense their nature, without searching for rational demonstration. “They came into being not through demonstration but through revelation, through the medium of powerful personalities” (*Ideas and Opinions*, 46). The importance that Einstein assigned to religion was thus very high, because religion’s main tasks are the foundation of ultimate human ethical principles and the search for the true ends of human life, not through rational demonstration but through revelation, independent of science. In Part 1 of “Science and Religion” Einstein said, “To make clear these fundamental ends and valuations, and to set them fast in the emotional life of the individual, seems to me precisely the most important function which religion has to perform in the social life of man” (*Ideas and Opinions*, 45).

Einstein reconsidered the independence of ethics from rational thought in later writings. In the 1950 paper “The Laws of Science and the Laws of Ethics,” reprinted in *Out of My Later Years*, Einstein declared that there is no difference between the laws of science and the laws of ethics: Both are judged by their consequences. “Ethical axioms are found and tested not very differently from the axioms of science. Truth is what stands the test of experience” (*Out of My Later Years*, 115). Thus he separated the judgments of ethics from the scope of religion, bringing them under the control of rational thought.

GOD

In his analysis of the relationships between science and religion, Einstein identified three different concepts of God that correspond approximately to three different stages of the evolution of religious thought. The first concept of God was developed before human beings were conscious of the laws regulating the causal connections between natural phenomena. Therefore they invented anthropomorphic supernatural beings who controlled the course of events and were responsible for natural phenomena. The main motive for this conception of God was fear: the “fear of hunger, wild beast, sickness, death” (*Ideas and Opinions*, 39). Thus Einstein spoke of a “religion of fear” (40), in which people followed traditional rituals in the hope of gaining the benevolence of God.

Einstein called the second concept of God “the social or moral conception of God” (*Ideas and Opinions*, 40) because social and moral concerns are the main source of religious practice. God is the father who protects, rewards,

comforts, and punishes his children and guarantees the immortality of the human soul. An important task of this kind of religion, which is typical in modern times, is to justify the adoption of specific views of morality and to provide the context for advocating social justice.

Both the religion of fear and the moral and social conception of God are ingredients, in varying degrees, in all historical religions. Primitive religions are mostly, but not exclusively, based on fear, and contemporary religions are primarily based on moral and social concerns, though fear is also a motive force. In these contexts, a special caste—the priests—occupies the important position mediating between God and the people. The priests, who are instrumental in stabilizing the ritual of religion, are usually linked with political rulers and privileged classes, are in control of education, and guide people in their social behavior, crystallizing the division of society into classes.

In these two types of religious thought God is conceived of as an anthropomorphic being. Einstein identified this concept of a personal God as the main source of conflict between science and religion, because this concept of God conflicts with the main aim of science, that is, to establish unrestricted laws, which do not admit exceptions, governing the reciprocal connections of objects. These laws, which Einstein identified with causal laws, exclude the possibility of supernatural intervention: God cannot interfere with natural events. It is true, said Einstein, that science cannot definitely refute the conception of a personal God, because domains exist in which science has not been able to determine general laws. However, if religion restricts itself to these domains to protect itself from science, it will lose its influence on human society. Thus “teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope which in the past placed such vast power in the hands of priests” (*Ideas and Opinions*, 52). Only thus it is possible to prevent a conflict between science and religion. A religious man is a man who has liberated himself from “selfish desires” (48) and is preoccupied with “superpersonal value” (*ibid.*, 48), independent of any conception of a divine being.

Einstein called the third stage of religious thought the “cosmic religious feeling” (*Ideas and Opinions*, 41). God is not conceived of as an anthropomorphic being; in a sense, the only function of God is to guarantee the regularity of the universe. Among the forerunners of the cosmic conception of God, Einstein cited some books of the Bible (the Psalms of David, Prophets), Buddha, Democritus, Spinoza, and St. Francis of Assisi. No religious practice corresponds to this conception of God because it is futile to try to secure God’s benevolence. God does not interfere with natural laws, does not make miracles, does not reward human beings, does not punish them. This mature conception of God has its main source in the scientific contemplation of nature, which discloses the exact regularity of the causal laws of nature and thus renders inconceivable the conception of a God interfering with nature in order to reward and punish his creatures.

Einstein explicitly subscribed to the cosmic conception of God. He believed in an impersonal God who is not concerned with the fate of human beings, but who reveals himself in the order and harmony of the universe. In 1929 the Boston archbishop, Cardinal William Henry O'Connell, accused Einstein's relativity theory of atheism. Rabbi Herbert Goldstein, the founder of the Institutional Synagogue in New York, cabled to Einstein, who lived in Berlin, asking, "Do you believe in God?" Einstein replied with the often cited statement "I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings" (see Clark, 502; Schillp, 659–660; Jammer, 49). Rabbi Goldstein concluded—I think correctly—that Einstein was neither atheist nor agnostic, and that relativity theory represents a scientific formula for monotheism; I do not subscribe to this latter point. Some scholars have regarded this declaration of Einstein as a sign of his atheism. However, a thorough analysis of his thought shows that even though his conception of God excludes the possibility of positive religion, Einstein was not an atheist. The cosmic conception of God asserts the ineffectiveness of religious practices, but it does not assert the nonexistence of God. Of the thinkers cited by Einstein as fore-runners of the cosmic conception, St. Francis of Assisi is secure from a charge of atheism, and Spinoza tried to prove the necessary existence of God in his *Ethics*. Einstein explicitly affirmed his disbelief in a personal God and denied the very possibility of conventional religion, but he indeed had a faith in a God who guarantees the order of the cosmos.

PEACE AND WAR

Einstein is usually depicted as a pacifist; however, his pacifism did not exclude the possibility of using military power to guarantee peace. In several circumstances he advocated the creation of a world government supplied with a suitable military force. In the 1945 paper "Atomic War or Peace," reprinted in *Ideas and Opinions* and in *Out of My Later Years*, he suggested that this world government should be founded by the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain, "the only three powers with military strength" (*Ideas and Opinions*, 130). He added, "The power of this world government would be over all military matters, and there need be only one further power. That is to interfere in countries where a minority is oppressing a majority, and so is creating the kind of instability that leads to war. . . . There must be an end to the concept of non-intervention, for to end it is part of keeping the peace." (130–131). Einstein advocated the use of military force against countries in which there was oppression; he explicitly mentioned Argentina and Spain, which in those days had right-wing governments. For Einstein, the use of military force was acceptable—in fact, necessary—for peacekeeping.

A similar line of reasoning was presented in the 1934 paper “On Military Service,” reprinted in *Out of My Later Years*, in which Einstein proposed an international court of justice capable of enforcing its decisions by means of a permanent military force. In this paper he also spoke against conscientious objectors, claiming that they reduce the power of democratic countries against totalitarian ones. Previously, in several circumstances, Einstein had spoken in favor of conscientious objectors, advocating international laws to protect them (*Ideas and Opinions*, 108) and proposing to give “moral and material support to the courageous conscientious objectors in each country” (117). Evidently, Einstein’s pacifism was mitigated by the advent of fascism and Nazism, so that he saw in military force the only possible resistance to their menace. If this interpretation of Einstein’s pacifism is correct—there is no general agreement on this point—the notorious letter that he wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt suggesting the development of a nuclear war program seems a necessary step, more than an accidental error due to political naïveté. This letter, signed by Einstein but drafted by Hungarian physicist Leo Szilard, is dated August 2, 1939, a month before the start of World War II. The letter warned President Roosevelt of the possibility of the construction of a nuclear bomb by Germany. Einstein suggested securing a supply of uranium for the United States and providing government funds to speed up the experimental work on nuclear chain reaction. Only on October 11—after World War II had begun—did the economist Alexander Sachs deliver the letter, with a memorandum by Szilard, to the president. Roosevelt responded on October 19, 1939, telling Einstein that he had instituted a board to investigate the matter; some funds were granted to the project. Years later, Einstein regretted having signed this letter, which is often regarded as the starting point of the American nuclear weapon project (in which Einstein did not take part) that ended with the dropping of the two atomic bombs on Japan in 1945.

I think that Einstein’s pacifism was, at this time, superseded by practical considerations: Unilateral disarmament is dangerous; conscientious objection, though admirable, is ineffective against a totalitarian regime; the keeping of peace requires a suitable military force; and international order must be enforced by military power. A striking example of these practical considerations can be found in the previously cited “Atomic War or Peace.” Einstein suggested that the constitution of a world government be prepared by representatives of three governments (the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain) because “three men can succeed in writing a workable constitution. . . . Six or seven men, or more, probably would fail” (*Ideas and Opinions*, 130). This consideration is probably correct from a practical point of view, but it does not seem to be very democratic, to say the least. It is my opinion that Einstein applied to pacifism the same kind of considerations that he was accustomed to apply to physical theories: The justification of a scientific theory resides only in the success of its results, and in the same way the justification of pacifism resides only in the success of its results. In the 1930s, facing fascism and

Nazism, Einstein realized that pacifism, in its purest form, was ineffective, and thus his position shifted toward a kind of pacifism that does not refute the use of military force for peacekeeping.

Einstein himself recollected this episode in his paper "Why Socialism?" reprinted in *Out of My Later Years* and in *Ideas and Opinions*. He discussed with an intelligent and well-disposed man the threat of another war, which in his opinion would seriously endanger the existence of humans, and he remarked that only a supranational organization would offer protection from that danger. Thereupon his visitor, very calmly and coolly, said to him, "Why are you so deeply opposed to the disappearance of the human race?"

It is interesting how Einstein applied his pacifism to the Arab-Jew question in Palestine. In "Our Debt to Zionism" from 1938, reprinted in *Out of My Later Years* and in *Ideas and Opinions*, Einstein praised the Zionist movement. He said, with reference to the situation in Palestine: "Fields cultivated [by Jews] by day must have armed protection at night against fanatical Arab outlaws" (*Ideas and Opinions*, 207), apparently justifying the fight of Jews against Arabs. However, in the same paper, Einstein's position was different in writing about the establishment of a Jewish state. He opposed the creation of a Jewish state, preferring a peaceful coexistence with Arabs. His main concern was the possible development of a narrow nationalism in a Jewish state, which would result in damage to Judaism itself (207). Ten years later, Einstein signed, with more than twenty intellectuals, a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, objecting to the visit to the United States of Menachem Begin, the leader of the Herut (Freedom), a right-wing political party in Israel. The first paragraph of the letter claimed that this political party was "closely akin in its organization, methods, political philosophy and social appeal to the Nazi and Fascist parties" ("New Palestine Party—Visit of Menachem Begin and Aims of Political Movement Discussed," *New York Times*, December 4, 1948). The letter condemned an Israeli attack against an Arab village, Deir Yassin, in which about 240 Arabs were killed by "terrorist bands." We can see that Einstein fought nationalism in the state of Israel and denounced without hesitation every form of violence, including violence perpetrated by his own people.

A few days before his death Einstein signed the so-called Russell-Einstein manifesto, which called for an international conference to discuss the threat posed by nuclear weapons. The manifesto, signed by Einstein, Bertrand Russell, and nine other scientists and philosophers, concluded with the following resolution: "In view of the fact that in any future world war nuclear weapons will certainly be employed, and that such weapons threaten the continued existence of mankind, we urge the governments of the world to realize, and to

acknowledge publicly, that their purpose cannot be furthered by a world war, and we urge them, consequently, to find peaceful means for the settlement of all matters of dispute between them.”

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The Existentialists

Max Deutscher

INTRODUCTION

In writing this chapter on the religious views of the leading existentialists, I refer to various ways of *being existential* rather than to a fixed body of ideas called *existentialism*. It is foreign to the spirit of existential writing to talk of some essence of belief or theory called *existentialism*, but there is general agreement about the practices and moods that mark out writers whose works are *existential*. It is the genre of *being existential*—as a writer, or thinker, or in one's life—that brings together the religious, nonreligious, irreligious, and antireligious writings called *existentialist*. To write existentially is to do more than to propose answers, whether religious or irreligious, to specific questions about religious belief. Whether expressing or rejecting religious feeling and practice, the existential mode is closer to the bone of religion than is any theoretical argument about the existence of a Being that created and controls the world. Whether religiously or irreligious, the existential writer describes and evokes ways of responding to whatever he or she encounters when living in the terrain that used to be that of religious belief.

Even in the space of this short essay we must consider some details of existential writing. It is only in the detail that we become acquainted with the existential style. One can demarcate existential religious and irreligious writing clearly enough simply by listing some of its main figures: Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Karl Jaspers (1883–1969), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), and Albert Camus (1913–1960). Around these names, then, gather many others—some theologians, such as Nicolai Berdyaev, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, and the neo-Thomist Jacques Maritain. Others present the existential style without theory, such as the novelists Franz Kafka and Fyodor

Dostoyevsky and the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. And there are writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty who developed new forms of philosophy out of their encounter with the existential style. Such “post-existential” work developed its own gravity and force, establishing new issues that have sidelined the debates between religion and irreligion.

The existential style of writing is long established. In the immediacy and the personal character of his thinking, Kierkegaard, like Nietzsche after him, called upon traditions that stretch from the dialogues of Socrates (470–399 BCE) through the *Confessions* of St. Augustine (354–430 CE) to the *Meditations* of René Descartes (1596–1650) and the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1788). To read this array of existential writers is to discover that religious, irreligious, and antireligious mentalities may equally be existential. Furthermore, the skepticism of existentially religious writers concerning orthodox *belief* matches that of an existential nontheist such as Jean-Paul Sartre.

Kierkegaard, the first of the modern existential group, promoted an existential “knight of faith”—a figure like Cervantes’s Don Quixote, whose genius is to go on living as if among giants and demons with regard to which *belief* is utterly absurd. Kierkegaard wrote in reaction to systems of ideas in established Christianity, and yet he clung to faith. One chooses “in fear and trembling” to make this Quixotic “leap”—or to walk away from religion.

Friedrich Nietzsche succeeded the religiously inclined Kierkegaard. For having written “God is dead” he is famous for being an atheist. But no orthodox atheist would say such a thing. God was never alive, according to the rationalist tradition that stems from the rise of science in the seventeenth century. This line, “God is *dead*,” is a self-conscious absurdity on Nietzsche’s part. He was well aware that in traditional theology, God is defined as immortal. Any being that died is thus revealed to have been an impostor. This analysis runs closer to Nietzsche’s own spirit—religious believers have made not merely some intellectual error: The disguises of mountebanks and con men have gulled them.

Like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche liked to distance himself from his own words. He created figures that personify the mentalities that he wanted to expose. He presented us, for instance, with a “madman” rushing about with a lantern at midday, who declaims that we have “murdered God.” The figure of a lantern at midday indicates that the man is shouting what is already as plain as day. God is a being of our own creation that we have now destroyed. (This resonates with the tale by Nietzsche’s predecessor, Mary Shelley, of Frankenstein who, creating a new being, cannot abide his “monster,” which is hunted from society.) Nietzsche resembled the avowedly religious Kierkegaard in aiming his attacks against systems of metaphysics and the institutions of Christianity. Nietzsche went further, though, and attacked the very spirit of Christian humility and self-abasement as a self-deceptive play for power.

"Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours? . . . 'Whither is God,' he cried. 'I shall tell you. *We have killed him – you and I.* . . . Gods too decompose. God is dead, God remains dead. We have killed him.'"

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 125

LINKS BETWEEN EXISTENTIAL STYLES

One tells the story of existential writing by making comparisons across time, not by tracing a progression from earlier to later figures. For instance, Jean-Paul Sartre was closer in mood to the Kierkegaard and Kafka who wrote a century before him than he was to his contemporary, Merleau-Ponty. But Sartre was also indebted to the systematic philosophy of his immediate predecessors, Husserl and Heidegger. Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) was the founder of phenomenology as a study of the world as it appears. His student Martin Heidegger modified Husserl's project of describing modes of experience of objects. He evoked and described ways of *being in the world*. Sartre drew upon both of them in 1943 in *Being and Nothingness*, the classic statement in philosophical terms of an existential consciousness.

Looking back from Sartre's achievement to that of Heidegger himself, one can see that he, too, carried Husserl's formal phenomenology into the existential genre. Like Sartre after him, Heidegger wrote not only about but within those disturbing moods in which we respond to what there is, and to *there being* what there is. Though he disclaimed being an existentialist, his mood and his themes may place him within the modern existential writers. And passages in Husserl's last work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, are distinctly existential. He evoked the mood and situation of philosophy, in the 1930s, as thinking while standing on the edge of an abyss.

Karl Jaspers, Heidegger's German contemporary, influenced as he was by Eastern philosophy as well as the classical Western tradition, is usually placed with the existential writers, too. In *Reason and Existenz* he claimed that when we think freely, beyond social habituation, we are aware of an "encompassing" limit to thought. This limit, like the visual horizon, is inescapable even as it is elusive. Another contemporary, Gabriel Marcel, wrote in a classically existential style, pursuing the paradoxes that lie within the details of everyday existence. Like the Protestant Kierkegaard, he maintained a faith in spite of his critique of Christian doctrine when considered as factual *opinion*. A century later we find Marcel steadfastly maintaining his (Catholic) faith even while dismantling its dogmas. In his existential critique of the literal resurrection

of the dead he claimed that it amounts to an abandonment of those who once lived. It is to think of them as now stowed away in heaven, having no need of our continuing faithfulness. It is not by consigning those who have lived to immortality elsewhere, but by holding them in memory, that we maintain our faith with them. Although Marcel was thus radically unorthodox in his every approach to traditional religion, he wrote within a religious sensibility. Like the atheist, he rejected the Christian “miracles” as historical events, but he strove to give religious language a new lease on life as describing a deep significance in human existence.

There are crisscrossing lines of inspiration and resemblance between the various kinds of existentially religious and irreligious writings. I have cited as paradigmatic the works of Kierkegaard, Kafka and Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Marcel, Jaspers, Camus, Beauvoir, and Sartre. Some critics would place Heidegger at the very center, while others would respect his own rejection of existentialism. Certainly, he wrote about the themes that others treat existentially—anxiety, care, abandonment, authenticity—and treated the world as something in which we are involved, or fail to be involved. He wrote of us as *being in the world* rather than as encountering it as objects and events of which we are disinterested spectators. He did not assert atheism or theism but installed within philosophy the gravity and intensity of language of existence, guilt, anxiety, and death that is commonly the province of a religious genre.

One must mark the unique contribution of Simone de Beauvoir. She collaborated closely with Sartre in the writing of *Being and Nothingness* and identified the style and themes of her novels (and theory such as *The Ethics of Ambiguity*) as existentialist. In her most famous work, *The Second Sex*, she was phenomenological in method and existential in her insistence on freedom, but she succeeded in ambitions more far-reaching than those of any other existential writer. (Merleau-Ponty, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, set another kind of outer limit on existential philosophy.) In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir developed a new style of philosophy. Her writing, though informed by her collaborative work with Sartre, breaks free from existential egocentricity. In “Dreams, Fears and Idols” (in *The Second Sex*) she understood religion as making an institution of men’s contradictory dreams and fears of women. According to an analysis she shared with Sartre, any conscious being desires intimacy but is threatened by being regarded by another within this intimacy. The absurd (but socially entrenched) solution is for men to pose women as occasions for intimacy and yet to refuse to regard them as beings that exist for themselves. Women become merely the essential “other” of men and come to be seen as essentially “mysterious,” as if unknowable in and for themselves.

Within traditional Christian thought women are the “complement” of men, existing to supply what men *lack*. It is thus women’s business, conceptually and socially, to be caring—concerned with husbands, children, or the social good, rather than themselves. A “good woman” is good at displacing herself—and good at hiding the painful and confusing facts of this displacement.

"Simone de Beauvoir became an unbeliever at an early age, in part through the influence of her father, Georges, a forthright atheist. But Beauvoir's rejection of Catholicism resulted in many disputes with her mother, Françoise. When Simone was placed in the Institut Sainte-Marie in Neuilly, Françoise hoped that the school's Christian teaching would revive Simone's faith. 'Sometimes, when I was studying at night, I would catch [Françoise] staring at me with a long face . . . and she would ask if there was a chance I was feeling some stirring of religious feeling. When I always said no, well, that was the end of it. No other conversation followed.'"

—Bair, 95

"In woman is incarnated . . . the lack that the existent [man] carries in his heart, and it is in seeking to be made whole through her that man hopes to attain self-realisation" (*Second Sex*, 173). Beauvoir exposed the Christian archetype of the "virgin" mother as an ideal who fulfills her sexual function without any trace of her own sexual involvement and enjoyment. She demonstrated that Kierkegaard, who clung to a religion he had exposed as absurd, clung also to the mystification of women:

"To be a woman," says Kierkegaard in *Stages on the Road of Life*, is something so strange, so confused, so complicated, that on one predicate comes near expressing it, and that the multiple predicates that one would like to use are so contradictory that only a woman could put up with it. (*Ethics of Ambiguity*, 175)

KIERKEGAARD, NIETZSCHE, AND SARTRE ON RELIGION

At the age of twenty-eight Søren Kierkegaard, educated in literature and philosophy, broke off his engagement to Regine Olsen and committed himself to writing. Whether or not he broke with his fiancée precisely in order to sublimate his passion, he did promote that conceit, indicating his hope that by devoting himself to writing he could transform his temporary love for Regine into a form of writing about love and religion—something that could last while his relationship could not. Having already written on irony (his doctoral thesis), and then about a "fear and trembling" in which we take ultimate responsibility for what we decide, he proceeded over the next few years to work on connected themes of "anxiety," "dread," and the "sickness unto death" that attend the demands of faith. Kierkegaard also wrote tracts attacking conventional religious discourse and institutions.

More-or-less directly after his successful thesis on irony and his unsuccessful attempt at a relationship of love and sexuality, Kierkegaard wrote an extended reflection in two voices of the alternatives of inconstant, uncommitted

sexual love and conventional marriage. He called this, famously, *Either/Or*. And then he wrote the most widely read of all his works with a title (*Fear and Trembling*) that has become virtually synonymous with his name. The book is set out in the style of a journal and, in a disarmingly intimate fashion, leads the reader into the complexities of his thought. As if it were his own, he discussed the problem that appears to Abraham when God commands him to sacrifice Isaac. How is one to begin to think of Abraham as he contemplates making a burnt offering of his beloved son (as Kierkegaard sacrificed Regine for the art of writing)?

In debating the question of Abraham, Kierkegaard departed from the standard style of philosophical ethics or theology by employing devices of fiction. He wrote four versions of what Abraham was thinking and feeling, and how he conducted himself after the commandment, and how he might have been thinking during the days of travel to Mount Moriah, where the sacrifice was to have been made. Kierkegaard evoked the feelings, reasonings, and actions of someone who feels “called by God” to act against his love for Isaac—and against God’s own edicts. What emerges in these stories that Kierkegaard wove around the simple biblical record is not religious apologetics. Nor is it an atheist’s condemnation of religion as encouraging people to homicidal fanaticism. Kierkegaard made an appeal beyond established religious belief or disbelief. He pondered how Abraham can be remembered forever as a great man, if faith could have prepared him to kill his son. At one stage, his narrative has Abraham asking forgiveness of God for having been prepared to obey him.

Kierkegaard’s retelling of the story highlights problems of faith that the spare biblical account leaves implicit. This retelling has Sarah witness Abraham from a window as he sets out in the early morning. She must know that something is afoot. What is her role? Is there a complicity of silence here? Kierkegaard’s narrator of these fictions is “Johannes de Silentio,” whose recurrent theme is the silence that permeates the Abraham story. Abraham says, “Here I am” to his “God,” and nothing more. He asks no questions of God and says nothing to Sarah or to Isaac himself. Johannes tells of the two, traveling in silence, and imagines that Abraham might fear that Isaac’s faith in God would be destroyed if he suspected that God has ordered his killing. So, in this new fiction, Abraham tells Isaac that God has nothing to do with it. He tells the fearful Isaac that he, Abraham, is an idolater—it is merely a religious maniac who is about to kill him. As Abraham anticipates, Isaac loses faith in his father but keeps his faith in God and calls upon God to save him.

This version of the story satirizes, in fact, the aggressive atheist who would read the story of Abraham as merely the account of a maniac from whom a child would need protection. The irony that Kierkegaard brought to the interpretation is of Abraham himself being aware of this aggressive condemnation of his faith. He had Abraham use this very interpretation to protect Isaac from doubting God. The remaining three versions narrated by Kierkegaard’s

“Johannes” further reveal how the situations of Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah interlock. Kierkegaard rejected religious faith as any kind of *opinion* about facts. He demonstrated through these varying stories how no coherent set of religious beliefs can justify or rationalize for Abraham, or for us, what he feels he must do.

So Kierkegaard used the story not to justify Abraham but to alert the reader to a certain existential possibility of morally charged situations in which we have no guidance from established moral and legal standards. (Hannah Arendt called this “thinking without banisters.”) The language of someone as before God rather than before society represents this dilemma in dramatic form. Only in mania can one totally ignore prevailing standards, and yet to rely on them utterly is to lose faith in one’s own individuality and the responsibility that individuality entails. Kierkegaard’s language of faith in God expresses this stark individual consciousness of individual responsibility. Thus Kierkegaard’s writing remains within a religious genre even though he rejected doctrinal belief. Only the language of faith indicates his depth of feeling about the human situation.

Kierkegaard is typical of the religious existential thinkers in placing no weight on traditional proofs or arguments for a “God” as an existent being that created and monitors the world. They agree with their existentially *irreligious* counterparts that *as opinions*, the specific doctrines of the incarnation, the miracles, and the bodily resurrection are absurd. But they reclaim that very absurdity as their impulse toward a pure leap of faith. In what do they have faith, then? Existential religion might place this very question out of bounds.

In response to this moral impasse some will invoke an irreligious substitute for faith: a coded system of social ethics, rules of proper conduct for an ordered society. Questioning the adequacy of that, the existential writer, religious or not, will see the significance of this story of Abraham who has to recognize his own responsibility for obeying God. Secularists are reminded that they, too, must accept their responsibility for abiding by or for breaking what they may find to be monstrous in these social rules. Kierkegaard did not defend Abraham, as if one ought to do whatever one’s God says. Rather, his versions of the story remind us how we may be called upon to think and act against what we have been taught to believe is our social or religious duty. Imagine: Someone loves his or her country above all else—as Abraham loves his son. But the elected leaders commit that person to an unjust war. She or he feels like Abraham when God commands him to kill Isaac. Such a person may feel forced toward acts of treason. (German citizens plotted to assassinate Hitler; people in South Africa opposing apartheid risked their lives and those of others in acts that the authorities called sedition.) Kierkegaard made us recognize ourselves in Abraham’s situation, even if we are impatient that he should have listened for one moment to his God.

There is another side, though. Secretive and lonely acts of treason may be acts of high principle, but the mentality of Abraham’s secretive commitment

to kill his innocent boy does makes us deeply uneasy about any isolated individual judgments of what is right. Abraham's mentality may seem too much akin to that of our contemporary terrorists. In a subtle new reading of Kierkegaard's interpretations of Abraham's story, Jacques Derrida recognized the unbearable gravity of demands that transcend the conventions of morality and law, and he attributed this gravity to the silence that surrounds those demands (Derrida, 82–115). So one might reject the legitimacy of radically private judgments as acts of religious or quasi-religious faith. One might argue, instead, that individuals take proper responsibility precisely by not brewing their judgments in private. To respect the need for individual judgment of social rules, we must then emphasize the importance of freedom of speech, even including speech in favor of acts of violence and treason. If people are to think freely, against what is customarily accepted, they need critical public response, just as their complacent fellows need to be challenged. But Kierkegaard kept his distance from such humanist interpretations of religious consciousness. For him, in his leap of faith, a summons by God calls upon us as if from a source external to society, an unnameable Source.

NIETZSCHE

Nietzsche is most famous for his line "*God is dead*," which he attributed to characters he invented. He was attached to such epigrams and persistent in framing exposures of the self-interested motives behind religious self-sacrifice and asceticism. Nietzsche is also famous for suggesting that truth is an army of established metaphors, and "*God is dead*" is evidently one of those metaphors. An eternal Being could literally *die*, since it would not be literally *alive*. The entrenched notion of God fabricated during medieval times out of Greek and Hebrew traditions is of a Being beyond space and time. But life is a temporal process. So when we think it through, this "eternalist" medieval theology had already "killed" the living God of the Hebrews. Whereas the Greek gods *lived* (immortally), the God of medieval Christian theology *existed* (eternally) like the truths of mathematics—not within a time continuum.

Living faith is always out of step with the concepts of a formal theology, however, and the very concepts of Christian theology are at war, internally. The theologian's First Cause bears no temporal relation to the eventful world it is posited to "cause," whereas Christianity's origin does not lie in this Unmoved Mover but stems from a bodily Jesus, who was born, killed, and then (in documents written many decades later) reported as having been resurrected. Some hundreds of years later, to rationalize these inconsistencies, the doctrine of the Trinity was devised to proclaim the mystical identity of the bodily Jesus, God as "father," and God as a pure spirit beyond time. To identify the historical Jesus with such an *atemporal* Being is to speak (beyond human comprehension) of this "eternal" God as a *himself* that *lives*, even

though that is strictly absurd. But what is absurd to the human mind is uttered as an essential truth: Jesus *is* God.

But the puzzles multiply. Jesus could and did die. If God and Jesus are one, then God might come to the same bitter end. (Perhaps resurrection lasts only so long.) Nietzsche's "*God is dead*" profoundly unsettles the conventions of religious language. It flouts one rule that an immortal being cannot be said to die. It flouts the other rule that a Being outside time is neither alive nor dead. Suchchutzpah of Nietzsche, to present a madman and then Zarathustra to declare the death of Eternality! Precisely what the religious apologist had come to fear: "The saint answered, 'I praise the god who is my god. But what do you bring us as a gift?' . . . When Zarathustra was alone he spoke thus to his heart: 'Could it be possible? This old saint has not heard anything of this, that *God is dead?*'" (*Portable Nietzsche*, 124).

SARTRE

The writings of Sartre in the mid-twentieth century reveal an irreligious writer who was informed by Nietzsche's irreligious experiments with metaphor and expressionist philosophy and equally moved by Kierkegaard's religious existentiality. Sartre did not follow Kierkegaard's heroic gesture of maintaining faith because of its very absurdity, though his critique of religious faith as the expression of absurd and impossible desires is akin to Kierkegaard's defense of it. They were alike, too, in taking no interest in God as an intellectual postulate to explain the origin of the world or of life. Kierkegaard was already aware that as *opinions* such ideas are merely unreasonable. For Sartre, too, the old arguments for the existence of God were no longer worth mentioning. He showed good judgment in this. We see in our times how the attempt to reanimate religion as an explanation of the world has set up a hopeless debate between a "bad science" of dogmatic theology and a "good science" of tentative postulate and experiment. The existential sense of a "God" that knows our very hearts inwardly has more interesting motives.

In his analysis of what is at the heart of faith, Sartre was at one with those, like Kierkegaard, who maintain religion existentially rather than as an intellectual speculation about an intelligent creator. But Sartre (and Beauvoir, from her feminist perspective) departed from Kierkegaard in creating an intellectual and emotional framework within which also to criticize the religious impulse toward an inner faith. They would free us from the sense of living under the eye of a God who knows our innermost secrets. Sartre identified, as one of many related absurd desires that are part and parcel of human existence, the desire for an inner God. Where Kierkegaard used the absurdity he uncovered as an occasion for faith, Sartre freed us from that *religious* dedication to absurd desires. Yet he found it understandable and thought-provoking that we desire a being that is other than us and yet who knows us as from

within. Indeed, he exposed such desires as being at the heart of romantic love. A love of God enmeshes us in the same paradoxes, he argued.

"If by despair one means—as the Christians do—any attitude of unbelief, the despair of the existentialists is something different. Existentialism is not atheist in the sense that it would exhaust itself in demonstrations of the non-existence of God. Not that we believe that God does exist, but we think that the real problem is that man needs to understand that nothing can save him from himself, not even a valid proof of the existence of God."

—Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism as Humanism*, in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 311

When we understand the role that such desires play in our lives, they can lose their religious force even though they remain with us. Sartre showed, for instance, that a project of total sincerity is doomed, though we continue to desire that it succeed. The project is doomed because it is less than sincere not to recognize belief as such. And yet, to recognize belief as belief is already partially to undo belief. We can come to understand that were we to be "sincere" as the etymology of the word suggests—pure belief through and through—we would be fanatics. We would loudly insist on what we believe so as to be deprived of the power to think in a reflective space. There, we would hear the quiet voice reminding us that the very term *belief* imports the doubtfulness that sincere faith is supposed to surpass.

With Kierkegaard, Sartre recognized a desire that is close to the heart and mind—a desire that one could call "religious," which is untouched by the failure of religion to explain the world. Sartre described us as conscious of existing for ourselves, as if each is contained individually within his or her own world. Each feels as if absolutely alone in deciding what is valuable and what to do. This mode of awareness is shattered when we are exposed to another's observant appraisal: "I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through the keyhole; suddenly I hear a footstep. I shudder as a wave of shame sweeps over me. I realise my vulgarity and I am ashamed. . . . By the mere appearance of the Other, I pass judgment on myself as an object that appears to the Other" (*Being and Nothingness*; arranged from 259, 277).

Sartre used this observation to dismantle a consciousness of guilt and shame as before God, though that illusory consciousness has real origins. I cannot escape my awareness that my conscious existence remains fundamentally *as for another*. My conscious being as existing *for myself* is shattered whenever I become aware of being observed and appraised. I can never escape this sense of vulnerability to the look and appraisal of another. I can no longer think, like Descartes, that my existence as a conscious being is open and transparent

to myself, while hidden within my body from the perception of anyone else. I have perceived how the “other” has observed what I had taken to be my inner, private mentality. I am aware of another’s observation as striking “at my very heart.”

Sartre’s attention to matters of the heart departs from Kierkegaard’s, even though the anxiety and dread I feel when another’s observation explodes my self-conceit is just what Kierkegaard described in more religious terms as “fear and trembling”—a sense of dread and of the irony of human existence. When Abraham says, “Here I am,” he responds as ready to hear the inner voice that he calls God’s. He responds in fear and trembling, knowing that the scrutiny of Sarah, the tribal elders, or Isaac himself would shatter his faith. They might see just a crazed old man, or an envious hatred of Isaac that he cannot see for himself. These observations are not within his power to predict or to control. Whatever the others would see and say, even if awed and encouraging, would destroy that “pure inner faith” whose essence lies in the silence that Abraham maintains until that last moment when an “angel” stays his hand.

One flees from this sense of exposure to the perception and judgment of another. Philosophers invent complicated arguments to “prove” that no one can really observe another’s mentality—no one can know even that any other conscious being exists. Such desperate theories accentuate the problem. Sartre placed the religious impulse to place one’s Absolute Critic *within* oneself as one more absurd attempt to transcend one’s vulnerability to external scrutiny.

We desire (and fear) that there is a God because we desire the guaranteed presence of another who relieves our loneliness when everyone else has abandoned us, and who knows us as we know ourselves, as from within. However, to the extent that a being has a view of us separate from our own, that view is external, and the desire for a being that knows one as from within is at odds with the desire that, actually, one be known. I can engage in an inner drama—a make-believe—in which I am known as from within by internalizing someone I know, or by inventing an imaginary critic. But what is described religiously as a prayerful discourse with an inner voice is precisely the internal conversation that one calls thinking. Sartre did not expect to eliminate this desire for a Being that is other to me and yet who knows me without distance in my innermost thoughts and feelings: “[God] must of necessity be myself in order to apprehend my reality without intermediary and with demonstrative evidence, and yet . . . not be me in order that he may preserve his impartiality as a witness and be able over there both to be and not be the Other” (*Being and Nothingness*, 232).

To exist as under the eye of an Unseen Being is to imagine that the “someone” who might observe me is some specific Being who does. Sartre concluded, “This is shame before God; that is, the recognition of my being-an-object before a subject that can never become an object. . . . I exist alienated and I

cause myself to learn [as if] from outside what I must be. This is the [illusory] origin of fear before God" (*Being and Nothingness*, 290).

MARCEL, CAMUS, AND RELIGION

Marcel

Gabriel Marcel, a Catholic contemporary and fellow countryman of Camus and Sartre, may well be read as expressing, more quietly, this central point of Sartre's that a being who is privy to my intimate thoughts as they occur is really my conversational other, rather than a distinctly other being that exists *for itself*. Marcel's writings can appeal even to the nonreligious. Rather than enunciating dogmas and rationalizations of faith, they carry thought in a quiet and reflective tone. Like Sartre, he expressed the sense that there is always a point of view upon what I think, feel, and do, whether or not someone is actually present to observe and criticize me. For Marcel it was only a language of "God" that was adequate to the experience, but his treatment of religion is not entirely alien to a secular readership. Consider, for instance, his way of speaking about the traditional theology of life after death. First, he admonished the militant atheist for saying "the dead no longer exist." To say this is to "write them off." He had a shrewd point here. The dead are dead—that is a tautology. But what remains is the life of the one who has died. That they lived is a continuing fact—their actions and feelings remain as a matter of fact. To say that the life they led "no longer exists" means only that it is not now present before us. We cannot dismiss as "unreal," in comparison with a continuing life, a life that is over.

It was not only conventional humanism that Marcel admonished for judgments dismissive of those who have died. Equally, he called into question the attitude of those within religion who resort to a doctrine of the "immortality of the soul." To say that the dead live safely forever in "another place" is to "write off" our responsibility for them. It is to speak as if they longer need us—as if we need not keep them safe in our thoughts. The religious doctrine of immortality blanks out the specific reality of the lives of those who have died. It is that reality that remains in our memory and conduct after their death.

For Marcel, to keep faith with those who were not alive was neither to write them off as nonexistent, like Pegasus or Santa Claus, nor to send them off to some heavenly rest home so that we need never give them another thought. Marcel's religion was existential rather than theological. It allowed him to remind humanists of what they might forget in saying, "There is no life after death." They are liable to forget that, in death, the reality of a life is secured by finality, rather than lost. It is this *forgetting* that constitutes an existential "lack of faith." One may question, though, why Marcel remained

dedicated to a Christian expression of ideas whose words he maintained even as he reinterpreted their meaning. He seemed content to differ from the existentially irreligious by perpetuating religion in his forms of language, imagery, and mood.

In opening the first page of the second volume of Marcel's *Mystery of Being*, one might well think one was listening to Descartes in the midst of his hyperbolic doubts, or Sartre's Roquentin (in *Nausea*) when struck by the sheer facticity of existence of a tree root:

As I stand on the threshold of this second series, I have the same giddiness as that which comes over a traveller when he reaches the edge of an abyss. . . . We shall have to ask questions about the nature of being as such. . . . I shall continually revive the metaphors with which I reinforce my arguments. I shall say that everything happens now, rather as in a fugue when new voice intervenes. . . . We shall have to be continually on our guard against the traps that are hidden in language. . . . [For] the approach to this sanctuary of traditional ontology is bound to overpower us with . . . fatigue and oppression . . . of boredom. (2.1–5)

Marcel was skeptical of traditional theology (the usual “proofs” of the existence of God)—and equally skeptical of philosophical ontology (theories of what it is for something to have being). Toward the end of his explorations of language and experience, still striving to find the significance of a religious adherence to immortality, he wondered what the promise “*Thou shalt not die*” could mean. We live fully, he claimed, only in our intimate connections with another. Egoism makes life seem meaningless, and “intersubjective unity” takes us beyond that. So, after I die my life continues as in another's hands. But how does a “faith in God” bear on that intersubjectivity (2.171–173)? He suggested that “God” might signify not some metaphysical nonmaterial entity, but a “spirit” that we detect in human affairs. (*Metaphysical* talk in theology or philosophy about souls or spirits means very little, he claimed.) This “spirit” that Marcel found displayed in the human condition transcends egoism in a style of open reciprocity between one person and another, permitting each to think and act toward the other as a being with infinite possibilities. It was in this fashion that Marcel rejected a “materialism” that would regard us as mechanisms or functionaries. It was within this humanly oriented religion that he strove to make something of Christian hope.

This discovery in open reciprocity of unbounded possibilities in others, and ourselves, involves a rejection of what Marcel called the “demoniac” affirmation of self. One's *being* is this unbounded possibility that arises as we thus transcend our egoism. Marcel accepted that “if [religious] faith is understood in this sense, it does not seem to agree very closely with what is commonly meant [within theological religion] by the word” (2.194). Not dismayed, he “transcended” the dilemma between framing something resembling a proof of the existence of “God” and reducing faith to a human event. Since he

found the proofs unsound, he was prepared to use words like *divine* and *God* to describe what arises in human reciprocity.

The language of hope and faith in human possibilities that Marcel expressed in terms of the “divine” differs in mood and tone from the language of atheism. The spirit of atheism’s denial of God is foreign to the spirit that can emerge between people at their best, he suggested. Perhaps, as Luce Irigaray hinted some decades after Marcel’s death, one must effect a change in “divine” from noun to verb. In her language, we “divine” anew the sense of wonder that we can discover with each other—our wonder at what breaks free of that fateful closure that can set in between one person and another (Irigaray, 55–72). To spend time *being an atheist* is to behave in a fashion that is akin to Nietzsche’s madman—holding up a lantern when it is already noon. We might do better to recover a sense of earthly wonder in what we divine.

Camus

Albert Camus, a French citizen born in Algeria, is perhaps best known for his novel *L'Étranger* (usually translated as *The Outsider*, though *The Foreigner* or *The Stranger* might better express its theme). Whereas it was via his personae that Kierkegaard held to faith even though he was a “foreigner” or “stranger” to religious institutions and doctrine, Camus’s antihero Mersault contends with being a stranger in his own society. The problem that Camus identified in *L'Étranger* is no stranger to liberal-minded colonialists. Unable to identify with compatriots who oppress or exploit the colonized, they cannot feel at home, either, with the oppressed. The novel is an exploration of the consciousness of Mersault, a man who in his thinking, feeling, and will lives beyond the oversight of religion. His mother dies, and he appears to show no grief. After the funeral he goes to a comic movie and spends the night with his girlfriend. Later, on a beach, an Arab whom he has colluded with his violent friend to deceive blocks his path. Mersault, as if in a daydream, fires a shot and then, aroused by his own act, fires four more shots into the man’s body. At the trial for murder, it appears that the French authorities are looking for a way to get the French citizen off the charge; it is only an Arab who has been murdered, it is implied. But Mersault refuses to speak according to the moral conventions of remorse, or to plead an accident, and so on. The judge and prosecutor become disgusted with his lack of “feeling.” The evidence of his lack of any display of the conventions of grief at this mother’s death tells heavily against him.

A kind of moral mythology grew up around this novel during some decades after its publication. Mersault was cast as a kind of existential hero who remains true to himself and his actions despite what this might cost him in terms of punishment by established authority. More recent critiques stress the colonial theme and the fact that Camus himself treated the “Arab” as a morally empty cipher. Mersault is not such a moral innocent, as if merely bereft of

the armor of conventional morality. The “Arab” whom Mersault murders was the brother of a woman whom Mersault’s criminal friend has beaten up. Without a thought, Mersault has helped his friend escape just retribution—indeed, he helped create a trap for the woman. Nevertheless, Camus described with great subtlety how Mersault is capable of a sympathetic sensibility and showed how, when he appears to be impervious to his mother’s death, for instance, he is barely recovering from the shock of it. Camus’s Mersault inhabits a world beyond the oversight of any God of religion not because he rejects religion overtly, but because he lives as if not subject to the oversight of any conventions at all.

Camus portrayed Mersault as having a genuine sensibility but implied no criticism of the violence Mersault permits and commits in his state of passive receptivity. In subsequent works, such as *The Plague*, the central character Camus described is shaken by the immediacy of the suffering and need of others and is galvanized within his society, without feeling that he must completely identify with it. This engaged care is far from the giddy heroism of Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith”; it is equally distant from the initial unprincipled ennui of Sartre’s Roquentin. It is by an almost comic reflection on his situation that Roquentin emerges, from his “nausea” at existence, into a work of writing and the pleasures of music and social contact. We might see Camus’s character in *The Plague* as being a Mersault who has taken a different route into living his life—a sublimation of reflective thought into practical involvement. In their differing styles, Camus, Sartre, and Marcel agree that self-absorption empties life. But Camus and Sartre could envisage their characters emerging from that extreme of egoism while bypassing, all the same, Kierkegaard and Marcel’s stage of existential religion.

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The Founding Fathers

Edd Doerr

Six men may be regarded as the most important of the remarkable generation that designed and set in motion the government of the United States and created that mechanism for protecting freedom of religion and conscience known as separation of church and state: Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), Thomas Paine (1737–1809), George Washington (1732–1799), John Adams (1735–1826), Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), and James Madison (1751–1836).

Writings by and about these men are too voluminous for any one person to read in a lifetime, and their contributions to government, politics, science, literature, and other fields are so significant that this article is limited to a discussion of their views on religion and their influence on the development of church-state separation.

While all these men had distinct personalities, perspectives, and backgrounds, certain generalizations about them can be made. Historian Garry Wills agrees with William Lee Miller that “the chief founders of the nation were all deists—he [Miller] lists Washington, Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, and Paine, though many more leaders of the founding era could be added” (153). Wills concludes that “Whatever their faults, the deists delivered us from the horrors of pre-Enlightenment religion, title enough to honor. They also founded this country” (171).

Wills cites with approval John Murrin’s comment that “the Federal Constitution was, in short, the eighteenth-century equivalent of a secular humanist text. The [Convention] delegates were not a very orthodox group of men in any doctrinal sense. The only born-again Christian among them was probably Richard Bassett of Delaware . . . who said nothing at the Convention” (225).

Thus history gives the lie to the old and the present-day “theocon” propaganda campaigns to convince Americans that the founders set up a “Christian nation.” The overwhelming majority of eighteenth-century Americans

considered themselves Christians, though this did not necessarily connote orthodoxy. Also, only about 17 percent of the population in 1776 were actual church members (see Wills, 8). This statistic is borne out by the 1796–1797 Washington/Adams/Barlow treaty with Tripoli, which stipulated that “the Government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion” (Church, 123).

Deism, often referred to as a “natural religion,” was an outgrowth of the Enlightenment and the scientific revolutions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was almost never an organized religion or movement and lacked anything resembling orthodoxy. Deists generally believed in a deity or creator that did not intervene in human affairs. They tended to believe in an afterlife but rejected “the mystical and revealed elements of Christianity such as miracles, original sin, the Virgin Birth, and the Trinity” (Cooke, 240). Thomas Paine and Voltaire are probably the best exemplars of deism. Finally, deism may be regarded as a stage in the evolution of religious thought from the Enlightenment to the rationalism, freethought, and humanism of the nineteenth century and beyond.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Franklin had an astonishing career as printer, editor, author, inventor (bifocals, lightning rod, water harmonica), scientist (he studied electricity and the Gulf Stream), philosopher, ethicist, Freemason, politician, statesman, diplomat, abolitionist, opponent of dueling, defender of Native American rights, educator, civil libertarian, and founder of a subscription library, a fire company, a militia, and a philosophical society. He served as governor of Pennsylvania, founded the University of Pennsylvania, and persuaded Thomas Paine to move to America. He recruited the Marquis de Lafayette and Baron von Steuben to help the American revolutionary cause. He was a leading delegate to the Continental Congress and helped write the Articles of Confederation, the first U.S. constitution. As a diplomat he negotiated the all-important military agreement with France in 1778 and was the main architect of the 1783 Treaty of Paris that formally ended the American Revolution. He assisted in drafting the Declaration of Independence in 1776 and the Constitution in 1787. Two years before his death in 1790 he wrote that at the age of twenty-five he had come up with the idea of a “United Nations” organization.

Though raised as a Presbyterian, Franklin became a deist and freethinker at an early age. He never joined a church and seldom attended “public worship.” Near the end of his life he defined his deism in a letter to Yale College president Ezra Stiles:

I believe in one God, the creator of the universe; that he governs it by his Providence; that he ought to be worshipped; that the most acceptable service we can

render to him is doing good to his other children; that the soul of man is immortal, and will be treated with justice in another life respecting its conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental points of all sound religion, and I regard them as you do, in whatever sect I meet with them. (Cousins, 42)

Franklin criticized traditional religion this way: "I wish it [Christianity] were more productive of good works. . . . I mean real good works . . . not holy-day keeping, sermon hearing . . . or making long prayers, filled with flatteries and compliments despised by wise men, and much less capable of pleasing the Deity" (Seldes, 258). He added, "As to Jesus of Nazareth . . . I think his system of morals and his religion, as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw, or is like to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting changes, and I have, with most of the present dissenters in England, some doubts as to his divinity; though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it" (Cousins, 19).

On other occasions Franklin wrote, "Revelation, indeed, as such, had no influence on my mind" (Doerr, 340); "Lighthouses are more helpful than churches" (Seldes, 259); "The way to see by faith is to shut the eye of reason" (Seldes, 259); "The [Constitutional Convention of 1787] except for three or four persons, thought that prayers [at the convention were] unnecessary" (Schaaf, 85).

Franklin was clearly not an orthodox Christian. A consummate politician, he went out of his way to get along with people of every persuasion. In a 1772 letter to a British newspaper defending religious dissenters he wrote:

If we look back into history for the character of present sects in Christianity, we shall find few have not in their turns been persecutors, and complainers of persecution. The primitive Christians thought persecution extremely wrong in the Pagans, but practiced it on one another. The first Protestants of the Church of England, blamed persecution on the Roman church, but practiced it against the Puritans; these found it wrong in the Bishops, but fell into the same practice themselves both here [England] and in New England. (Seldes, 259)

As Franklin put it, "Every sect believing itself possessed of all truth, and that every tenet differing from theirs is error," some believing it their "duty" to persecute "heresy" (Schaaf, 65).

As early as 1738 Franklin wrote, "I think vital religion has always suffered when orthodoxy is more regarded than virtue. The scriptures assure me that at the last day we shall not be examined on what we thought but on what we did" (Schaaf, 38).

And "by degrees more moderate and more modest sentiments have taken place in the Christian world; and among Protestants particularly all disclaim persecution, none vindicate it, and few [practice] it. We should then cease to reproach each other with what was done by our ancestors, but judge the present character of sects or churches by their present conduct only" (Schaaf, 65).

As historian Gregory Schaaf puts it, “This was easier said than done but he deserves credit for attempting to moderate the situation” (65).

Elsewhere Franklin wrote:

I respected [every religion], [though] with different degrees of respect, as I have found them more or less [mixed] with other articles, which, without any tendency to inspire, promote, or confirm morality, [served] principally to divide us, and make us unfriendly to one another. This respect to all, with the opinion that the worst had some good effects, [induced] me to avoid all discourse that might tend to lessen the good opinion another might have of his own religion; and as our province [increased] in people and new places of worship were continually wanted, and generally erected by voluntary contributions, my mite for such purposes, whatever might be the sect, was never refused. (Schaaf, 33)

Stokes and Pfeffer point out that Franklin had high regard for the Baptists because they had no formal creed (203).

Franklin articulated a position common among religious progressives today: “Serving God is doing good to man, but praying is thought an easier service and therefore is more generally chosen” (Doerr, 340–341).

Franklin and Religious Liberty

Although he had less to say about religious liberty than Jefferson and Madison, Franklin was unquestionably in their camp. In 1780 he wrote to a Quaker friend, Richard Price, “When a religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and when it cannot support itself, and God does not care to support [it], so that its professors are obliged to call for the help of the civil power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one” (Seldes, 258; Schaaf, 53).

Norman Cousins ends his selection of Franklin quotes with this: “God grant that not only the Love of Liberty but a thorough knowledge of the rights of man [a title used by Paine shortly after Franklin’s death] may pervade all the nations of the earth, so that a philosopher might set his feet anywhere on its surface and say, ‘this is my country’” (Cousins, 43).

THOMAS PAINE

“The world owes Thomas Paine’s epic revolutionary career to Benjamin Franklin,” who met Paine in London and encouraged him to move to America in 1774, according to Paine historian Kenneth W. Burchell (589). Thanks to Franklin, Paine became editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine* when he arrived in Philadelphia.

Although the first battle of the American Revolution took place in Massachusetts early in 1775, the sharply divided Americans were not ready for a

complete break with Great Britain until large numbers were persuaded by Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* in January 1776 that gaining independence was the only way to proceed. *Common Sense*, which sold 120,000 copies in three months, took the country by storm and set the stage for the Declaration of Independence. Throughout the war Paine's series of essays, *The American Crisis*, kept Americans fighting during the grimmest of times. Joel Barlow wrote that "the great American cause owed as much to the pen of Paine as to the sword of Washington" (Burchell, 589).

As secretary of the Pennsylvania General Assembly Paine helped write the first law in the world to outlaw slavery. In 1787 he returned to England, where he wrote *The Rights of Man* in 1791–1792, a defense of the French Revolution that eventually led to his fleeing England for his life. He was hailed as a hero in France and elected to the French Assembly, where his moderation landed him in prison and in real danger of execution. It was immediately before and while he was in prison awaiting execution that he wrote the deist classic, *The Age of Reason*.

Having escaped execution in France, Paine returned to America in 1802 to face an endless storm of criticism and abuse for his outspoken deism. This hero of the American Revolution, British reformer, and French politician died largely unappreciated in 1809, the year in which Jefferson turned the White House keys over to Madison and in which both Darwin and Lincoln were born.

Paine's views on religion are found principally in *The Age of Reason*, a remarkable work written in France in 1793–1794 under the most adverse circumstances. Paine wrote *The Age of Reason* in part to combat the rather overboard atheism of French revolutionary leaders. The best way to examine his views on religion is to let him speak in his own words. (The quotations are from the edition cited in the bibliography; all italics are Paine's.)

"All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."

—Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (Cousins, 395)

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. (6)

I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist of doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy. (6)

But, lest it be supposed that I believe in many other things in addition to these, I shall, in the progress of this work, declare the things I do not believe, and my reasons for not believing them. (6)

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church I know of. My own mind is my own church. (6)

I do not . . . condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine. . . . Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what [one] does not believe. (6–7)

The commandments carry no internal evidence of divinity with them; they contain some good moral precepts, such as any . . . lawgiver, or a legislator, could produce himself, without having recourse to supernatural intervention. (9)

That such a person as Jesus Christ existed, and that he was crucified . . . are historical relations strictly within the limits of probability. He preached most excellent morality and the equality of man. (14)

Had it been the object or the intention of Jesus Christ to establish a new religion, he would undoubtedly have written a system himself, or *procured it to be written* in his life-time. (29)

As to the Christian system of faith, it appears to me as a species of atheism—a sort of religious denial of God. . . . It is a compound made up chiefly of Manism with but little Deism, and is as near to atheism as twilight is to darkness. It introduces between man and his Maker an opaque body, which it calls a Redeemer. (45–46)

The Almighty Lecturer, by displaying the principles of science in the structure of the universe, has invited man to study and to imitation. (52)

The setters-up, therefore, and the advocates of the Christian system of faith could not but foresee that the continually progressive knowledge that man would gain, by the aid of science, of the power and wisdom of God, manifested in the structure of the universe and in all the works of Creation, would militate against, and call into question, the truth of their system of faith; and therefore it became necessary to their purpose to cut learning down to a size less dangerous to their project, and this they effected by restricting the idea of learning to the dead study of dead languages. (57)

It is an inconsistency scarcely possible to be credited, that anything should exist, under the name of a religion, that held it to be *irreligious* to study and contemplate the structure of the universe that God has made. (61)

From whence, then, could arise the solitary and strange concept that the Almighty, who had millions of worlds equally dependent on this protection, should quit the care of all the rest, and come to die in our world, because, they say, one man and one woman had eaten an apple? (77)

The only idea we can have of serving God, is that of contributing to the happiness of the living creation that God has made. (81) The most extraordinary of all the things called miracles, related in the New Testament, is that of the devil flying away with Jesus Christ, and carrying him to the top of a high mountain,

and to the top of the highest pinnacle of the temple, and showing him and promising to him *all the kingdoms of the World*. How happened it that he did not discover America, or is it only with *kingdoms* that his sooty highness has any interest? I have too much respect for the moral character of Christ to believe that he told this whale of a miracle himself. (86–87)

The Bible tells us, that these assassinations were done by the *express command of God*. To believe, therefore, the Bible to be true, we must *unbelieve* all our belief in the moral justice of God. (101)

[The Bible] is a book of lies, wickedness, and blasphemy; for what can be greater blasphemy than to ascribe the wickedness of man to the orders of the Almighty? (121)

Natural philosophy, mathematical and mechanical science, are a continual source of tranquil pleasure, and in spite of the gloomy dogmas of priests and of superstition, the study of these things is the true theology; it teaches man to know and to admire the Creator, for the principles of science are in the creation, and are unchangeable and of divine origin. (158)

The story of Jesus Christ appearing after he was dead is the story of an apparition, such as timid imaginations can always create in vision, and credulity believe. (218)

Priests and conjurors are of the same trade. (235)

As to the fragments of morality that are irregularly and thinly scattered in [the Bible], they make no part of this pretended thing, revealed religion. They are the natural dictates of conscience, and the bonds by which society is held together, and without which it cannot exist, and are nearly the same in all religions and in all societies. (243)

Deism, then, teaches us, without the possibility of being deceived, all that is necessary or proper to be known. The creation is the Bible of the Deist. (247)

It has been the scheme of the Christian church, and of all the other invented systems of religion, to hold man in ignorance of the Creator, as it is of government to hold man in ignorance of his rights. (250)

These quotations from Paine's *Age of Reason* sum up his views on religion, and it is easy to see why they stirred the wrath of the orthodox and caused even old friends to nervously shun him, all but Jefferson.

Paine continued to write about religion until the end of his life. Two years before his death he wrote:

My own opinion is, that those whose lives have been spent in doing good, and endeavoring to make their fellow-mortals happy, for this is the only way in which we can serve God, *will be happy hereafter*; and that the very wicked will meet with some punishment. But those who are neither good nor bad, or are too insignificant for notice, will be dropped entirely. This is my opinion. It is consistent with my idea of God's justice, and with the reason that God has given me,

and I gratefully know that He has given me a large share of that divine gift. (italics in the original; Cousins, 443)

Paine on Religious Liberty

Paine wrote little specifically on religious liberty, but from what he did write one can infer that he concurred with the positions of Jefferson and Madison:

The word Sabbath means rest; that is, cessation from labor, but the stupid Blue Laws of Connecticut made a labor of rest, for they oblige a person to sit still from sunrise to sunset on a Sabbath-day, which is hard work. Fanaticism made those laws, and hypocrisy pretends to reverence them, for where such laws prevail hypocrisy will prevail also. (*The Prospect*, 1804; Menendez, 24)

Persecution is not an original feature in any religion, but is always the strongly marked feature of all law-religion, or religions established by law. Take away the law-establishment, and every religion re-assumes its original benignity. (*The Rights of Man*; Menendez, 53)

As to religion, I hold it to be the indispensable duty of all government to protect all conscientious professors thereof, and I know of no other business which government hath to do therewith. (*Common Sense*; Menendez, 151)

The adulterous connection of church and state, wherever it had taken place, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, had so effectually prohibited by pains and penalties, every discussion upon established creeds, and upon first principles of religion, that until the system of government should be changed, those subjects could not be brought fairly and openly before the world; but that whenever this should be done, a revolution in the system of religion would follow. Human inventions and priestcraft would be detected; and man would return to the pure, unmixed and unadulterated belief of one God, and no more. (*Age of Reason*, 7)

GEORGE WASHINGTON

The “Father of His Country” is too well known to require much introduction. Is there anyone who is unaware that he was supreme commander of American forces during the Revolution and later the two-term first president of the United States? He had been a lieutenant colonel in the Virginia militia at the age of twenty-two, had participated in the first battle of the French and Indian War (the Seven Years War), and had been a member of Virginia’s House of Burgesses from 1759 to 1774. Between the Revolution and his election as president he presided over the 1787 Constitutional Convention, which produced the United States Constitution.

Although Washington was not the greatest commander in the field, his great accomplishment was holding the revolutionary forces together for the duration of the war, won with the indispensable aid of France and Spain, not to mention

crucial British mistakes. The combination of his wartime abilities “saved the Federal Constitutional Convention. . . . He stayed outside the range of frequently bitter debate, using his authority sparingly so that he could apply his full prestige before the people of all the states in the biggest job of all, which was to get the Constitution ratified. This ability to stand symbolically before the nation with arms fully outstretched in order to appeal to and embrace all groups and parties caused many people to regard him as a national father” (Cousins, 44).

Although he was a deist, Washington’s prudence and diplomacy kept him above the religious controversies that affected Jefferson and Paine. Raised Anglican/Episcopalian, Washington declined to take communion after the beginning of the Revolution (Cousins, 47; Church, 104). And like most Virginia gentry he was an Episcopal Church vestryman, a position that dealt primarily with social, charitable, and financial matters.

As a uniter of a struggling country with no guarantee of success, Washington frequently invoked the Creator or Providence. He also spoke fervently about the need for reconciling the diverse religious sects in the young nation and in promoting religious tolerance as in the following examples.

In a letter to the Episcopal bishops on August 19, 1789, he wrote that

it would ill become me to conceal the joy I have felt in perceiving the fraternal affection, which appears to increase everyday among the friends of genuine religion. It affords edifying prospects, indeed, to see Christians of different denominations dwell together in more charity, and conduct themselves in respect to each other with a more Christian-like spirit than ever they have done in any former age, or in any other nation. (Cousins, 59)

Before Colonel Benedict Arnold began his unsuccessful expedition to seize French Canada from British control in September 1775, Washington, aware of the general American (and British) hostility to Catholicism, ordered Arnold to prevent any displays of antipathy toward French Catholics and “to protect and support the free Exercise of the Religion of the Country and the undisturbed Enjoyment of the rights of Conscience in religious matters, with your utmost Influence and Authority” (Cousins, 50).

Typical of his letters to religious leaders is his message on November 27, 1783, to a Reformed German congregation in New York: “Disposed, at every suitable opportunity to acknowledge publicly our infinite obligations to the Supreme Ruler of the Universe for rescuing our Country from the brink of destruction, I cannot fail at this time to ascribe all the honor of our late successes to some glorious Being” (Cousins, 57).

But for all Washington’s professed gratitude to the deist, all-purpose Creator, it was his steely nerve, dedication, persuasiveness, and unflagging optimism that carried the day in the Revolution, not to mention Franklin’s diplomacy, Paine’s pen, French and Spanish aid, British mistakes (dealt with by Bernard Shaw in *The Devil’s Disciple*), the courage of our fighting men, and sheer luck.

Washington on Religious Liberty

Our first president's devotion to religious liberty and church-state separation matched that of Jefferson and Madison, as examples from his letters show:

The establishment of Civil and Religious Liberty was the Motive which induced me to the Field. (letter of November 27, 1783, to the Reformed German congregation of New York; Cousins, 58)

If I could have entertained the slightest apprehension, that the constitution formed in the convention, where I had the honor to preside, might possibly endanger the religious rights of any ecclesiastical society, certainly I would never have placed my signature to it; and if I could now conceive that the general government might ever be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure, I beg you will be persuaded, that no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny, and every species of religious persecution. (May 1789 letter to the United Baptist Churches of Virginia; Cousins, 58)

I am persuaded . . . that the path of true piety is so plain as to require but little political direction. To this consideration we ought to ascribe the absence of any regulation, respecting religion, from the Magna-Carta of our country. (October 9, 1789, address to the Dutch Reformed Church in North America; Church, 107)

All [U.S. citizens] possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise, of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens. (letter to the Touro Synagogue, Newport, R.I., August 17, 1790; Church, 110–111)

As the matter now stands, I wish an assessment [Patrick Henry's bill to have taxes pay for teachers of religion] had never been agitated, and as it has gone so far, that the Bill could die an easy death. (letter to George Mason on October 3, 1785, regarding Henry's bill, which was defeated largely because of Madison's 1785 Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments; Cousins, 65)

Of all the animosities which have existed among mankind, those which are caused by a difference of sentiments in religion appear to be the most inveterate and distressing, and ought to be most deprecated. (letter to Sir Edward Newenham, October 20, 1792; Cousins, 67)

JOHN ADAMS

Early in his distinguished career Boston lawyer John Adams made a name for himself as successful defense counsel for British soldiers accused of murder in the 1770 "Boston Massacre," a disorder started by Bostonians. He served in

the Massachusetts Assembly and helped to write that state's constitution. As a member of the Continental Congress he and Franklin assisted Jefferson in composing the Declaration of Independence. Following the cessation of hostilities in the Revolution, he, Franklin, and John Jay negotiated the peace treaty with Great Britain. He and Jefferson missed the 1787 Constitutional Convention because they were ambassadors to Britain and France, respectively.

Adams served as vice president under Washington and then was elected president when Washington declined to run for a third term. He lost the 1800 election to Vice President Jefferson after a bitter campaign. The two were not again on the best of terms until after both were retired.

Adams lived to see his son, John Quincy Adams, sworn in as president in 1825. Remarkably, Adams and Jefferson died on the same day, the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

Adams thought and wrote about religion all his life, though modern readers may find his views sometimes seemingly contradictory. He was a Unitarian and also a deist, though he had little use for Thomas Paine for both religious and political reasons. We'll let Adams speak for himself.

"The Christian religion," he wrote in his diary in 1796, "is, above all the religions that ever prevailed or existed in ancient or modern times, the religion of wisdom, virtue, equity, and humanity, let the blackguard Paine say what he will" (Cousins, 99).

He could look at Christianity from different perspectives in the same piece of writing, as in this letter to Judge F. A. Van der Kamp in 1816:

Jesus is benevolence personified, an example for all men. . . . In its primitive purity and simplicity . . . it is the religion of reason, equity, and love; it is the religion of the head and of the heart. . . . But how has it happened that millions of fables, tales, legends, have been blinded with both Jewish and Christian revelation that have made them [i.e., Christianity] the most bloody religion that ever existed? How has it happened that all the fine arts, architecture, printing, sculpture, statuary, music, poetry, and oratory, have been prostituted, from the creation of the world, to the sordid and detestable purposes of superstition and fraud? . . . I am certain, there is nothing in this world worth living for but hope, and every hope will fail us, if the last hope, that of a future state, is extinguished. (Cousins, 104–105)

In a 1761 letter to Samuel Quincy, Adams scored Puritan Calvinism for

the same vanity which gave rise to that strange religious dogma, that God elected a precious few (of which few, however, every man who believed the doctrine is always one) to life eternal, without regard to any foreseen virtue, and reprobated all the rest, without regard to any foreseen vice. A doctrine which, with serious gravity, represents the world as under the government of humor and caprice, and which the Hottentots and Mohawks would reject with

horror. . . . You and I shall never be persuaded or frightened either by popes or councils, poets or enthusiasts, to believe that the world of nature, learning and grace is governed by such arbitrary will or inflexible fatality. We have much higher notions of the efficacy of human endeavor in all cases. (Cousins, 94)

In his *Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law*, 1765, Adams wrote:

Numberless have been the systems of iniquity contrived by the great for the gratification of this passion in themselves; but in none of them were they ever more successful than in the invention and establishment of the canon and the feudal law. . . . By the former of these, the most refined, sublime, extensive, and astonishing constitution of policy that was ever conceived by the mind of man was framed by the Romish clergy for the aggrandizement of their own order. . . . They even persuaded mankind to believe, faithfully and undoubtedly, that God Almighty had entrusted them with the keys of heaven, whose gates they might open and close at pleasure; with a power of dispensation over all the rules and obligations of morality; with authority to license all sorts of sins and crimes; with a power of deposing princes and absolving subjects from allegiance; with a power of procuring or withholding the rain of heaven and the beams of the sun; with the management of earthquakes, pestilence, and famine; nay, with the mysterious, awful, incomprehensible power of creating out of bread and wine the flesh and blood of God himself. All these opinions they were enabled to spread and rivet among the people by reducing their minds to a state of sordid ignorance and staring timidity, and by infusing into them a religious horror of letters and knowledge. Thus was human nature chained fast for ages in a cruel, shameful, and deplorable servitude to him and his subordinate tyrants, who it was foretold, would exalt himself above all that was called God and that was worshipped. . . .

They [Puritans] saw clearly that of all the nonsense and delusion which had ever passed through the mind of man, none had ever been more extravagant than the notions of absolutions, indelible characters, uninterrupted successions, and the rest of those fantastical ideas, derived from the canon law, which had thrown such a glare of mystery, sanctity, reverence, and right reverend eminence and holiness around the idea of a priest as no mortal could deserve, and as always must, from the constitution of human nature, be dangerous to society. For this reason they demolished the whole system of diocesan episcopacy, and, deriding, as all reasonable and impartial men must do, the ridiculous fancies of sanctified effluvia from Episcopal fingers, they established sacerdotal ordination on the foundation of the Bible and common sense. (Seldes, 42)

Although Adams and Jefferson were opponents during much of their careers, they eventually reconciled. The following quotes are selected from Adams's letters to Jefferson between 1813 and 1821:

Indeed, Mr. Jefferson, what could be invented to debase the ancient Christianity, which Greeks, Romans, Hebrews and Christian factions, above all the Catholics, have not fraudulently imposed upon the public? Miracles after miracles

have rolled down in torrents, wave succeeding wave in the Catholic church, from the Council of Nice [*sic*], and long before, to this day. (Seldes, 43)

If the Christian religion, as I understand it, or as you understand it, should maintain its ground, as I believe it will, yet Platonic, Pythagoric, Hindu, and cabalistic Christianity, which is Catholic Christianity, and which has prevailed for 1500 years, has received a mortal wound, of which the monster must finally die. Yet so strong is his constitution, that he may endure for centuries before he expires. (Seldes, 43–44)

The question before the human race is, whether the God of nature shall govern the world by his own laws, or whether priests and kings shall rule it by fictitious miracles. (Seldes, 44)

I do not like the late resurrection of the Jesuits. . . . If ever any congregation of men could merit eternal perdition on earth, and in hell, according to these historians, though, like Pascal, true Catholics, it is this company of Loyolas. (Seldes, 44)

Conclude not from all this that I have renounced the Christian religion. . . . Far from it. I see on every page something to recommend Christianity in its purity, and something to discredit its corruptions. . . . The ten commandments and the sermon on the mount contain my religion. (Seldes, 44)

In an 1814 letter to John Taylor, Adams wrote:

The priesthood have, in all ancient nations, nearly monopolized learning. . . . Priests had all the knowledge, and really governed all mankind. Examine Mahometanism, trace Christianity from its first promulgation, knowledge has been almost exclusively confined to the clergy. And, even since the Reformation, when or where has existed a Protestant or dissenting sect who would tolerate a *free inquiry*? The blackest billingsgate, the most ungentlemanly insolence, the most yahooish brutality is patiently endured, countenanced, propagated, and applauded. But touch a solemn truth in collision with a dogma of a sect, though capable of the clearest proof, and you will soon find you have disturbed a nest, and the hornets will swarm about your legs and hands and fly into your face and eyes. (Cousins, 108)

Adams on Religious Liberty

Although Adams wrote far less about religious freedom than Jefferson or Madison, it was on his watch that the Senate in 1797 unanimously ratified the U.S. treaty with Tripoli that contains the following section:

As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion,—as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Musselmen [Muslims] . . . it is declared by the

parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries. (Church, 123)

As Church points out, “Broadly distributed to papers across the country, [the treaty] was published with the following preamble authorized by the chief executive: ‘Now be it known, that I John Adams, President of the United States of America, having seen and considered the said treaty do, by and with the advice and consent of the senate, accept, ratify, and confirm the same, and every clause and article thereof. And to the end that the said treaty may be observed and performed with good faith on the part of the United States, I have ordered it to be made public’ ” (Church, 122–123).

Early in his career Adams wrote in his *Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law* (1765): “Let the pulpit resound with the doctrines and sentiments of religious liberty. Let us hear the dangers of thralldom to our consciences from ignorance, extreme poverty, and dependence, in short, from civil and political slavery” (Seldes, 43).

THOMAS JEFFERSON

Jefferson’s extraordinary career spanned more than fifty years. Benefiting from a fine education, he served in the Continental Congress and was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence. He was also governor of Virginia (1779–1781), a member of Congress (1783–1784), U.S. minister to France (1785–1789), U.S. secretary of state (1789–1793), U.S. vice president under John Adams (1797–1801), and U.S. president (1801–1809). During his presidency he doubled the size of the United States through the bargain-basement Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and fostered the 1804–1806 Lewis and Clark expedition. In 1825 he founded the University of Virginia.

All the while, he managed a plantation, was a practicing architect, played the violin, and wrote extensively. Along the way, he and Madison pioneered the uniquely American principle of church-state separation.

Jefferson and Adams died on the same day, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, that all-important contribution to the theory of government.

Jefferson drafted his own epitaph, which listed but three of his accomplishments: “Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia.”

The Sage of Monticello spent a lifetime studying and thinking about religion. Like Franklin, Washington, Adams, and Madison, he preferred to confine many of his views on religion to private correspondence. In an article of limited length we can only sample his extensive correspondence, fortunately made available in one book, Cousins’s *The Republic of Reason: The Personal Philosophies of the Founding Fathers*.

Jefferson's religious beliefs are summarized in his 1822 letter to Benjamin Waterhouse:

The doctrines of Jesus are simple, and tend all to the happiness of man. 1. That there is only one God, and he all perfect. 2. That there is a future state of rewards and punishments. 3. That to love God with all thy heart and thy neighbor as thyself is the sum of religion. . . . But compare with these the demoralizing dogmas of Calvin. 1. That there are three Gods. 2. That good works, or the love of our neighbor, are nothing. 3. That faith is everything, and the more incomprehensible the proposition, the more merit in its faith. 4. That reason in religion is of unlawful use. 5. That God, from the beginning, elected certain individuals to be saved, and certain others to be damned; and that no crimes of the former can damn them; no virtues of the latter save.

Now, which of these is the true and charitable Christian? He who believes and acts on the simple doctrines of Jesus? Or the impious dogmatists, as Athanasius and Calvin? . . . They are mere usurpers of the Christian name, teaching a counter-religion made up of the *deliria* of crazy imaginations, as foreign from Christianity as that of Mahomet. Their blasphemies have driven thinking men into infidelity, who have too hastily rejected the supposed author himself, with the horrors so falsely imputed to him. (160–161)

To his nephew Peter Carr, he wrote in 1787:

Man was . . . endowed with a sense of right and wrong, . . . This sense is as much a part of his nature, as the sense of hearing, seeing, feeling; it is the true foundation of morality. . . . This sense is submitted, indeed, in some degree, to the guidance of reason. . . . Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.

[The] New Testament . . . is the history of a personage called Jesus. Keep in your eye the opposite pretensions: 1, of those who say he was begotten by God, born of a virgin, suspended and reversed the laws of nature at will, and ascended bodily into heaven; and 2, of those who say he was a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition. (127–129)

To Jeremiah Moor in 1800: "The clergy, by getting themselves established by law, and ingrafted into the machine of government, have been a very formidable engine against the civil and religious rights of man" (130).

To Joseph Priestley in 1801: "Those who live by mystery and *charlatanerie*, fearing you would render them useless by simplifying the Christian philosophy,—the most sublime and benevolent, but most perverted system that ever shone on man,—endeavored to crush your well-earnt and well-deserved fame" (131).

To Thomas Leiper in 1809: "My religious reading has long been confined to the moral branch of religion, which is the same in all religions; while in that branch which consists of dogmas, all differ, all have a different set. The former

instructs us how to live well and worthily in society; the latter are made to interest our minds in the support of the teachers who inculcate them. Hence, for one sermon on a moral subject, you hear ten on the dogmas of the sect” (138).

To Samuel Kercheval in 1810: “But a short time elapsed after the death of [Jesus] . . . before his principles were departed from by those who professed to be his special servants, and perverted into an engine for enslaving mankind, and aggrandizing their oppressors in Church and state; . . . the purest system of morals ever before preached to man had been adulterated and sophisticated by artificial construction, into a mere contrivance to filch wealth and power to themselves; that rational men, not being able to swallow their impious heresies, in order to force them down their throats, they raise the hue and cry of infidelity, while themselves are the greatest obstacles to the advancement of the real doctrine of Jesus, and do, in fact, constitute the real Anti-Christ” (139).

To Thomas Law in 1814: “I have observed, indeed, generally, that while in protestant countries the defections from the Platonic Christianity of the priests is to Deism, in catholic countries they are to atheism. . . . I consider our relations with others as constituting the boundaries of morality. . . . Nature has constituted utility to man the standard and best of virtue” (141–144).

To Mrs. Harrison Smith in 1816: “I have never told my own religion, nor scrutinized that of another. I have never attempted to make a convert, nor wished to change another’s creed. I have ever judged of the religion of others by their lives, . . . For it is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read” (146–147).

To Jared Sparks in 1820: “The religion-builders have so distorted and deformed the doctrines of Jesus, so muffled them in mysticisms, fancies and falsehoods, have caricatured them into forms so monstrous and inconceivable as to shock reasonable thinkers, to revolt them against the whole, and drive them rashly to pronounce its founder an imposter” (156–157).

Old friends turned rivals turned friends again, Jefferson and Adams carried on an extensive correspondence about religion and other subjects from 1812 until the last year of their lives. The letters are excerpted in Cousins’s *The Republic of Reason*, from which are extracted the following from Jefferson:

If thinking men would have the courage to think for themselves, and to speak what they think, it would be found that they do not differ in religious opinions as much as is supposed. (237)

The Christian priesthood, finding the doctrines of Christ leveled to every understanding, and too plain to need explanation, saw in the mysticism of Plato materials with which they might build an artificial system, which might, for its indistinctness, admit everlasting controversy, give employment for their order, and introduce it to profit, power and pre-eminence. The doctrines that flowed from the lips of Jesus himself are within the comprehension of a child; but

thousands of volumes have not yet explained the Platonisms engrafted on them; and for the obvious reason, that nonsense can never be explained. (263)

Bigotry is the disease of ignorance, of morbid minds; enthusiasm of the free and the buoyant. Education and free discussion are the antidotes of both. (278)

The result of your fifty or sixty years of religious reading, in the four words, 'Be just and good,' is that in which all our inquiries must end. (281)

To talk of immaterial existences is to talk of nothings. To say that the human souls, angels, God, are immaterial, is to say, they are nothings, or that there is no God, no angels, no soul. I cannot reason otherwise: but I believe I am supported in my creed of materialism by the Lockes, the Tracys, and the Stuarts. (286)

Perhaps the most interesting of Jefferson's contributions to a discussion of religion is the "Jefferson Bible." He went through the Gospel accounts of Jesus's life with razor and paste, removed all reference to miracles and features he considered unreasonable or supernatural, and produced what he titled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, published many years after his death.

Scholars generally believe that the "Jefferson Bible" was completed in 1819. Although Jefferson regarded Jesus as a great ethical teacher, he wrote to Judge Van der Kamp:

It is not to be understood that I am with [Jesus] in all His doctrines. I am a Materialist. He takes the side of Spiritualism. He preaches the efficacy of repentance toward forgiveness of sin; I require a counterpoise of good works to redeem it. . . . Among the sayings and discourses imputed to Him by His biographers, I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality, and of the most lovely benevolence; and others, again, of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, so much untruth, charlatanism and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same Being. I separate, therefore, the gold from the dross; restore to him the former, and leave the latter to the stupidity of some, and roguery of others of His disciples. (Church, 27–28)

Jefferson on Religious Liberty

Jefferson and fellow Virginian Madison were the dynamic duo who together accomplished what neither might have been able to do alone: create the American legal principle of separation of church and state.

As early as 1782 Jefferson wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* that "difference of opinion is advantageous in religion. The several sects perform the office of a censor morum over each other" (Menendez, 62). And, "Is uniformity attainable? Millions of men, women, and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned; yet we have not advanced one inch toward uniformity. What has been the

effect of coercion? To make one half the world fools and the other half hypocrites” (Menendez, 121).

The ferment of the political revolution applied as well to widespread consideration of what to do about religious toleration or freedom in our increasingly pluralist nation. In 1779 Jefferson introduced his Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia. The vicissitudes of the war and Jefferson’s subsequent posting as U.S. minister to France delayed action on the bill. It was finally approved on January 16, 1786, after Madison had contrived to sidetrack Patrick Henry’s bill to provide tax support for all churches by means of his powerful and still relevant 1785 “Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments” (Menendez, 209).

It is clear from history and from their writings that the founders of the American republic intended its government to be secular (i.e., religiously neutral) and that Jefferson’s metaphor of the “wall of separation between church and state” accurately reflects that intention. History likewise shows that church-state separation has proven to be good for religion, good for democratic government, and good for the equal liberties and freedom of conscience of all. As historian Garry Wills puts it so well in his magisterial book *Head and Heart*, the deists who designed our republic “delivered us from the horrors of pre-Enlightenment religion, title enough for honor” (171). Those who would dismantle Jefferson’s “wall” would take us back to those “horrors.”

The operative section of Jefferson’s bill read,

Be it therefore enacted by the General Assembly, that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities. (Church, 76–77)

That language remains in the Virginia Constitution, with the addition of language forbidding “any tax for the erection or repair of any house of worship, or for the support of any church or ministry.” And, “The General Assembly shall not make any appropriation of public funds, personal property, or real estate to any church or sectarian society, or any association or institution of any kind whatever which is entirely or partly, directly or indirectly, controlled by any church or sectarian society” (Doerr and Menendez, 95–96). This language became the model for most of the rest of the state constitutions.

The following year saw the convention in Philadelphia at which the U.S. Constitution was drafted.

A significant religious liberty matter came up during Jefferson's first term as president. He had won the 1800 election in part because Baptists, Presbyterians, and other dissenters believed that religious liberty would be better protected with the Virginian in the White House.

In the fall of 1801 the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut, concerned that their state had not yet separated church and state (which did not occur until 1818), wrote to Jefferson about their concerns. Both the Baptists and Jefferson knew that religious freedom was still a state matter, but the Baptists expressed the hope that Jefferson's influence would eventually be felt in their state.

On January 1, 1802, Jefferson, after conferring with Attorney General Levi Lincoln, replied to the Danbury Baptists in a letter that came to have considerable influence on the courts and on public opinion. He wrote, in part,

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people that their legislature would "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between church and state. (Church, 129–130)

Jefferson's unforgettable separation metaphor entered American law in 1879 in a U.S. Supreme Court case, *Reynolds v. United States* (98 U.S. 145). The Court quoted the letter and commented, "Coming as this does from an acknowledged leader of the advocates of the measure, it [the wall metaphor] may be accepted almost as an authoritative declaration of the scope and effect of the amendment [the First Amendment] thus secured" (Alley, *The Constitution and Religion*, 417).

Jefferson's metaphor was cited again by the Supreme Court in 1947 in *Everson v. Board of Education* (330 U.S. 1) in this famous paragraph:

The "establishment of religion" clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another. Neither can force nor influence a person to go to or to remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs, for church attendance or non-attendance. No tax in any amount, large or small, can be levied to support any religious activities or institutions, whatever they may be called, or whatever form they may adopt to teach or practice religion. Neither a state nor the Federal Government can, openly or secretly, participate in the affairs of any religious organizations or groups and

vice versa. In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect “a wall of separation between church and State.” (Alley, *The Constitution and Religion*, 52)

This famous quotation was repeated by the Court in *McCullum v. Board of Education* (333 U.S. 203) in 1948 (Alley, *The Constitution and Religion*, 167).

Jefferson remained a strong defender of church-state separation all his life. In an 1808 letter to Rev. Samuel Miller he wrote, “I consider the government of the United States as interdicted by the Constitution from intermeddling with religious institutions. . . . I do not believe it is for the interest of religion to invite the civil magistrate to direct its exercises, its discipline, or its doctrine” (Menendez and Doerr, 147).

JAMES MADISON

Madison ranks as one of the most important of the Founders. At twenty-five he was a member of the convention that drew up the Virginia constitution in 1776 and then served in both the Continental Congress and the Virginia legislature. In 1787 and 1789 he was the chief architect of both the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. He was one of the authors, along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, of the *Federalist Papers*, which appeared under the common signature “Publius” in a New York newspaper. These essays explained and sold the proposed constitution to the American people.

Madison went on to serve as U.S. secretary of state under Jefferson, and then as President for two terms. He and Jefferson became the founders of what is now the Democratic Party.

Madison, though he studied theology at Princeton (then the College of New Jersey), rarely referred to his own opinions about religion. In a letter to William Bradford, Jr., in 1772 he wrote that “a watchful eye must be kept on ourselves, lest while we are building ideal movements of renown and bliss here, we neglect to have our names enrolled in the annals of Heaven” (Cousins, 298).

In a letter to Frederick Beasley in 1825 he wrote that “the belief in a God All Powerful wise and good, is so essential to the moral order of the World and to the happiness of man” (Cousins, 321).

To a Reverend Adams he wrote in 1832, “There appears to be in the nature of man what insures his belief in an invisible cause of his present existence, and anticipation of his future existence” (Cousins, 323).

While Madison was at least a nominal Episcopalian all his life, his close relationship with Jefferson and other deists and his lifelong devotion to religious freedom and church-state separation make it not unreasonable to infer that he was a deist like the other principal Founders.

Madison and Religious Liberty

Where Madison stood tallest was his leadership in creating the machinery for protecting religious freedom.

As early as 1772 he wrote to his college friend William Bradford, Jr., that

ecclesiastical establishments tend to great ignorance and corruption; all of which facilitate the execution of mischievous projects. . . . Poverty and luxury prevail among all sorts; pride, ignorance, and knavery among the priesthood, and vice and wickedness among the laity. . . . That diabolical, hell-conceived principle of persecution rages among some; and to their eternal infamy, the clergy can furnish their quota of imps for such business. . . . There are at this time in the adjacent county not less than five or six well-meaning men in close jail for publishing their religious sentiments, which in the main are very orthodox. (Cousins, 299)

He wrote Bradford in 1774 and compared “the liberality of Pennsylvania with the intolerance of Virginia,” adding that “religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise, every expanded prospect” (Flynn, 515).

At the Virginia Revolutionary Convention in 1778 Madison and George Mason succeeded in getting into the state constitution this provision: “That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore, all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience.” Mason had originally used the term *toleration* but Madison insisted on replacing it with *free exercise* (Flynn, 515).

Madison’s next great effort was to block Patrick Henry’s 1784 bill to provide tax support to all “Teachers of the Christian Religion,” which Madison rightly regarded as a multiple establishment of religion. Madison’s strategy then was to have the legislature stall consideration of Henry’s bill until late 1785 while supporting Henry’s election to the governorship to get him out of the legislature.

Then, in mid-1785, Madison wrote and widely distributed his justly famed “Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments,” aimed at defeating Henry’s bill.

Historian Elwyn Smith has hailed the “Memorial and Remonstrance” as “the premier public document of American church-state thought.” Eminent church-state legal scholar Leo Pfeffer described it as “one of the great documents in the history of human liberty,” which “should be required reading in every American school.” Madison biographer Irving Brant wrote that “the remonstrance against religious assessments continues to stand, not merely through the years but through the centuries, as the most powerful defense of religious liberty ever written in America.” Canon Anson Phelps Stokes considered

it “one of the truly epoch-making documents in the history of American church-state separation; as impressive and convincing today as it was over a century and a half ago” (Flynn, 515).

The following is excerpted from this important document:

We the subscribers, citizens of the said Commonwealth, having taken into serious consideration, a Bill printed by order of the last Session of General Assembly, entitled “a Bill establishing a provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion,” and conceiving that the same if finally armed with the sanctions of a law, will be a dangerous abuse of power, are bound as faithful members of a free State to remonstrate against it, and to declare the reasons by which we are determined. We remonstrate against the said Bill,

1. Because we hold it for a fundamental and undeniable truth, “that Religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence.” The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right . . . because the opinions of men, depending only on the evidence contemplated by their own minds cannot follow the dictates of other men: It is unalienable also, because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator. It is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage and such only as he believes to be acceptable to him. . . . We maintain therefore that in matters of Religion, no man’s right is abridged by the institution of Civil Society and that Religion is wholly exempt from its cognizance. . . .

3. Because it is proper to take alarm at the first experiment on our liberties. . . . The free men of America did not wait till usurped power had strengthened itself by exercise, and entangled the question in precedents. They saw all the consequences by denying the principle. . . . Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects? that the same authority which can force a citizen to contribute three pence only of his property for the support of any one establishment, may force him to conform to any other establishment in all cases whatsoever?

4. Because . . . whilst we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace, to profess and to observe the Religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence which has convinced us. If this freedom be abused, it is an offence against God, not against man. To God, therefore, not to man, must an account of it be rendered. . . .

5. Because the Bill implies either that the Civil Magistrate is a competent Judge of Religious Truth; or that he may employ Religion as an engine of Civil policy. The first is an arrogant pretension falsified by the contradictory opinions of Rulers of all ages, and throughout the world; the second an unhallowed perversion of the means of salvation.

6. Because the establishment proposed by the Bill is not requisite for the support of the Christian Religion. To say that it is, is a contradiction to the

Christian Religion itself, for every page of it disavows a dependence on the powers of this world. . . .

7. Because experience witnesseth that ecclesiastical establishments, instead of maintaining the purity and efficacy of Religion, have had a contrary operation. During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution. Enquire of the Teachers of Christianity for the ages in which it appeared in its greatest lustre; those of every sect, point to the ages prior to its incorporation with Civil policy. . . .

8. Because the establishment in question is not necessary for the support of the Civil Government. . . . If Religion be not within the cognizance of Civil Government how can its legal establishment be necessary to Civil Government? What influence in fact have ecclesiastical establishments had on Civil Society? In some instances they have been seen to erect a spiritual tyranny on the ruins of the Civil authority; in many instances they have been seen upholding the thrones of political tyranny; in no instance have they been seen the guardians of the liberties of the people. Rulers who wished to subvert the public liberty, may have found an established Clergy convenient auxiliaries. A just Government instituted to secure & perpetuate it needs them not. Such a Government will be best supported by protecting every Citizen in the enjoyment of his Religion with the same equal hand which protects his person and his property; by neither invading the equal rights of any Sect, nor suffering any Sect to invade those of another.

9. Because the proposed establishment is a departure from that generous policy, which, offering an Asylum to the persecuted and oppressed of every Nation and Religion, promised a lustre to our country, and an accession to the number of its citizens. . . . Instead of holding forth an Asylum to the persecuted, it is itself a signal of persecution. It degrades from the equal rank of Citizens all those whose opinions in Religion do not bend to those of the Legislative authority. Distant as it may be in its present form from the Inquisition, it differs from it only in degree. The one is the first step, the other the last in the career of intolerance. . . .

10. Because it will have a like tendency to banish our Citizens. The allurements presented by other situations are every day thinning their number. To superadd a fresh motive to emigration by revoking the liberty which they now enjoy, would be the same species of folly which has dishonoured and depopulated flourishing kingdoms.

11. Because it will destroy that moderation and harmony which the forbearance of our laws to intermeddle with Religion has produced among its several sects. Torrents of blood have been spilt in the old world, by vain attempts of the secular arm, to extinguish Religious discord, by proscribing all differences in Religious opinion. . . . If with the salutary effects of this system under our own eyes, we begin to contract the bounds of Religious freedom, we know no name that will too severely reproach our folly. At least let warning be taken at the first fruits of the threatened innovation. The very appearance of the Bill has transformed

“that Christian forbearance, love and charity,” which of late mutually prevailed, into animosities and jealousies, which may not soon be appeased. What mischiefs may not be dreaded, should this enemy to the public quiet be armed with the force of a law?

13. Because attempts to enforce by legal sanctions, acts obnoxious to so great a proportion of Citizens, tend to enervate the laws in general, and to slacken the bands of Society. . . .

15. Because finally, “the equal right of every citizen to the free exercise of his Religion according to the dictates of conscience” is held by the same tenure with all our other rights. If we recur to its origin, it is equally the gift of nature. (Menendez and Doerr, 209–215)

Madison’s “Memorial and Remonstrance” and similar appeals doomed Henry’s assessment bill and led to the passage of Jefferson’s Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom in early 1786.

A little over a year later delegates from the states met in Philadelphia to draft the U.S. Constitution. Though the convention was presided over by Washington, it was Madison who was the Constitution’s principal architect.

Although the Declaration of Independence included references to a deity, a generic creator of the deist sort, the Constitution’s only references to religion are in Article VI, which stipulates that “no religious test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States” and specifies that all members of the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of both the federal and state governments “shall be bound by Oath or *Affirmation*,” the latter provision barring mandatory religious oaths.

And just as the Declaration stated that “to serve these [equal, unalienable] Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the consent of the Governed,” so, too, does the Constitution, omitting any reference to a deity, state, “We the People . . . do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” These facts support Garry Wills’s conclusion that the Founders were deists who intended government to be secular, that is, religiously neutral.

Ratification by the states ran into roadblocks, among them, as Jefferson noted in a letter to Madison from Paris, the absence of a bill of rights. Ratification following assurances that a bill of rights would be prepared, the First Congress took the time in 1789 to draft such a document, again with Madison playing quarterback.

Several versions of the Bill of Rights clause on religious liberty were considered by Congress and the final version that was approved by a conference committee, to Madison’s satisfaction, became the first part of the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This was the language Jefferson interpreted in 1802 as erecting “a wall of separation between church and state,” a view reaffirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1879 and 1947 and also in later rulings.

Madison had wanted the Bill of Rights to be applicable to the states as well, but the country was not yet ready. It was only after the Civil War that the Fourteenth Amendment, intended to do just that, was passed. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court did not acknowledge this until after World War I, and even then under the piecemeal “incorporation” theory.

Madison’s interest in religious liberty and church-state separation remained strong. In 1787 he successfully opposed including a mention of aid to religion in the Northwest Ordinance. In 1790 he successfully opposed including questions about religion in the U.S. census. As president he vetoed bills to incorporate the Episcopal Church in Alexandria, Virginia, and the District of Columbia (out of fear that incorporation would lead to a dangerous level of accumulation of land and wealth by churches) and a bill to grant land to a Baptist church in the Mississippi Territory (Flynn, 515–517).

After he left the White House Madison continued to comment on this life-long interest. In 1819 he wrote Robert Walsh that “the number, the industry, and the morality of the Priesthood, & the devotion of the people have been manifestly increased by the total separation of the Church from the State.” In 1822 he wrote Edward Livingston that “religion flourishes in greater purity, without than with the aid of Gov’t” (Flynn, 517).

Between 1817 and 1832 Madison wrote a series of observations on various topics, discovered and published in 1946 by Elizabeth Fleet in the *William and Mary Quarterly* as the “Detached Memoranda.” In them Madison opposed grants of public land to churches, tax exemption of religious entities, mention of the deity in government documents, congressional chaplains, and religious proclamations by government (Flynn, 517).

Historian William Lee Miller has written that “John Marshall, the future chief justice, who was usually an opponent of Madison, nevertheless said of him that if eloquence included ‘persuasion by convincing, Mr. Madison was the most eloquent man I ever heard.’ He persuaded by his thorough preparation, his layers of reading, his logical powers; he made his mark not by his tongue or his throat, or by his presence, but by his pen and his brain and his diligence.”

EPILOGUE

What did the founders bequeath to posterity? A secular (i.e., religiously neutral) government that has proven to be the best guarantor of freedom of religion and conscience, a level playing field on which all religions, life stance, philosophical, political, and other viewpoints can contend, and a system that encourages the pluralism the Founders considered the best defense against deadening conformity.

The religious references in the Declaration of Independence are not specifically Christian but deist. Similar religious language was considered unnecessary by

the drafters of the Constitution. The Declaration's statement about rights being endowed by a Creator were the words of besieged revolutionaries struggling for independence from an Old World order that enshrined the "divine right of kings."

America and the legacy of the founders today face unprecedented challenges from "theocons" and theocrats of the religious right and their political enablers who would tear down Jefferson's "wall of separation." As in Robert Frost's poem, Americans stand today at a crossroads and will have to choose which of the diverging roads to follow.

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Sigmund Freud

Kirk Bingaman

THE PARADOXICAL FREUD

It has been said of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the most notable psychologists of religion of the past century, that they both struggled to come to terms with intense father complexes. These unresolved complexes would form the basis of their views on religion. Jung, so the conventional thinking often goes, came to be the “friend” of religion, while Freud became its quintessential “enemy,” the friend of the atheist. This understanding, however, fails to grasp the complexity of their religious views, which emerged in a particular time and place and in the context of a unique set of family relations. Jung, for example, demonstrated a consistent openness toward the spirit of religion but was, at the same time, highly critical of organized forms of religion. His father, a Swiss Reformed pastor and, interestingly enough, Jung’s confirmation teacher when he was a boy, consistently disappointed Jung because of his inability to articulate clearly the meaning of the church’s teachings. Not surprisingly, Jung, even as an adolescent, began to develop a suspicious view of Christianity’s capacity to transform the spiritual life of the religious believer.

Jung’s openness toward the realm of spirit and religion is, of course, what precipitated the falling out between him and Freud. To Freud, Jung had gone off the deep end into the “black tide of mud . . . of occultism” (quoted in Palmer, 91), seemingly forsaking the scientific spirit. The matter, then, in Freud’s mind, was settled: Religion, in any shape or form, is an obstacle to the healthy development of the human individual and, even more, to the collective development of the human race. We must, as human beings and especially as psychoanalytic practitioners, grow up into reality and model this reality for our patients. If not, we are, as Freud made abundantly clear in *The Future of an Illusion*, destined to remain children forever. How, exactly, do we grow up

into reality, becoming more than we have ever been before as human beings? By renouncing once and for all the core illusion of religion that reinforces our infantilization. Freud, in one of the classic lines from *The Future of an Illusion*, wrote that “surely, infantilization is destined to be surmounted, because in the end human beings cannot remain children forever” (24, 49). Apparently, Jung, still enamored of the archetypal significance of religious myths, rituals, and symbols, was content to remain a child forever and, worse, encouraged others to do so. If Jung was positioning himself as the “friend” of religion, then he would have to do it on his own, having been banished from the school of psychoanalysis. Freud, on the other hand, took the higher ground, positioning himself as the champion of science, and thereby earning his reputation as the enemy of religion par excellence.

But is the story so cut and dried? Jung, as we have seen, was not too friendly toward various religious doctrines and teachings of the church. His relationship with religion, then, was deeply complex and rather double-edged. Could the same be said of Freud? Perhaps not going so far as to say that Freud was friendly toward religion, might it not be that Freud, too, shared an equally complicated relationship with what he would label a “universal neurosis”? On the surface, at least, it seems simple enough: Religion, the universal neurosis of the human race, had outlived its usefulness and relevance, having been superseded by the scientific spirit that eliminated the need for any and all illusions. Fair enough, but why then spend a significant portion of your life thinking and writing about this “irrelevant” phenomenon, something supposedly headed toward oblivion? Freud saw it as his duty to warn us of the dangerous manifestations of religious faith, which were all around him in Europe during the World Wars and are ever before us today. But that is not all. Freud, unlike recent unbelievers, such as Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, who point out the links between religious faith and violence, focused more on religion’s capacity to infantilize human beings, to perpetually stunt their growth and development and keep them childlike forever.

What, we may ask, accounts for Freud’s inconsistencies when it comes to the matter of religion? On the one hand, he had little good to say about it, dismissing it as an illegitimate force in the development and evolution of the human race; yet, on the other hand, it consumed him. There was, as it were, something of a disconnect in Freud between his words and his actions, an incommensurateness. For example, the psychoanalyst Ana-Maria Rizzuto, in her important book *Why Did Freud Reject God?* notes that “the chronological study of all Freud’s writings, from correspondence to published works, reveals that biblical citations occur in most of them and that Freud cites the Bible more frequently than any other source” (206). Does this make Freud a religious believer in the conventional sense, or in any sense for that matter? I would not go that far, even though Freud’s lifelong preoccupation with religion certainly casts the matter in a more nuanced light. More recently,

Mark Edmundson, in his enlightening essay that appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, points out that toward the end of Freud's life there was quite possibly a hint of rapprochement between him and religion. "No," writes Edmundson, "Freud didn't begin showing up at temple every Saturday, wrapping himself in a prayer shawl and reading from the Torah." He goes on to say, "But in his last completed work, *Moses and Monotheism*, something new emerges. There Freud, without abandoning his atheism, begins to see the Jewish faith that he was born into as a source of cultural progress in the past and of personal inspiration in the present. Close to his own death, Freud starts to recognize the poetry and promise in religion" (15).

This complex attitude toward religion, I would argue, illustrates quite vividly the paradoxical Freud, making it rather difficult to situate him exclusively in the camp of atheism or unbelief. Believers, for example, point to him as the atheist among the atheists, the archenemy of religious faith. Unbelievers, on the other hand, such as Hitchens, cite him as an "ally" in the quest to expose "the weak-minded childishness of religion" (Edmundson, 15). Either way you slice it, the issue is not so black and white. Freud cannot be considered purely an enemy, nor purely an ally. Though he would never be considered "religious" in any conventional sense, there is evidence to suggest, as Edmundson notes, that Freud toward the end of his life came to recognize some value in the Jewish faith that he had been born into. Even if it was a modified Judaism that he was putting forward in *Moses and Monotheism*, it was nonetheless a religious tradition from which Freud derived a measure of genuine pride and inspiration.

FREUD AND HIS "UNHEROIC" FATHER

It was not always this way. In fact, it took Freud a lifetime to come to terms with the Jewish faith of his birth, let alone derive any inspiration from it. It is worth recounting an important event in Freud's life when he was around the age of eleven. Keep in mind that, from a developmental standpoint, this is a pivotal age. Freud wrote, in his magnum opus, *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

At that point I was brought up against the event in my youth whose power was still being shown in all these emotions and dreams. I may have been ten or twelve years old, when my father began to take me with him on his walks and reveal to me in his talk his views upon things in the world we live in. Thus, it was, on one such occasion, that he told me a story to show me how much better things were now than they had been in his days. "When I was a young man," he said, "I went for a walk one Saturday in the streets of your birthplace; I was well dressed, and had a new fur cap on my head. A Christian came up to me and with a single blow knocked off my cap into the mud and shouted: 'Jew! Get off the pavement!'" (197)

Not unexpectedly the young boy Freud asked of his father the question that any boy his age would ask:

“And what did you do?” I asked. “I went into the roadway and picked up my cap,” was the quiet reply. This struck me as unheroic conduct on the part of the big, strong man who was holding the little boy by the hand. I contrasted this situation with another which fitted my feelings better: the scene in which Hannibal’s father, Hamilcar Barca, made his boy swear before the household altar to take vengeance on the Romans. Ever since that time, Hannibal had had a place in my phantasies. (197)

The memory of his father’s humiliation and seeming passive acceptance of the humiliation was forever seared in Freud’s mind. As Jung developed a father complex, based on his profound disappointment with his father’s intellectual and spiritual weakness, so, too, Freud developed a similar complex stemming from the disdain he felt over his father’s “unheroic conduct.” It is important to keep in mind that both Freud’s and Jung’s father complexes had very powerful associations with religion. When Jung, for example, as a young confirmee, pressed his minister father to elaborate on the doctrines and teachings of the church, his father invariably told him simply to believe them and not worry about their meaning. This response, as we might expect, did not sit well with Jung, either as an early adolescent boy or later as an adult when he formulated his psychology of religion. The same can be said of Freud, perhaps even more so. Why? The image of his father’s humiliation, forever seared into his memory, had multiple religious associations for Freud. His *Jewish* father, Jacob, had been subjected to a humiliating act of anti-Semitism perpetrated by a *Christian* townsman. It is little wonder, then, that Freud spent the rest of his life grappling with the powerful cultural phenomenon of religion, for it shaped his life and his thinking in very profound ways. Moreover, the father who had disappointed his young son, who had displayed “unheroic conduct” in the face of humiliation, who had let the townsman humiliate him without doing anything about it, had an equally profound impact on Freud. The two, in fact—religion at its worst and an unheroic father—coalesced in Freud’s mind to form the foundation of his psychology of religion.

RELIGION AND THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

In order to grasp the essence of Freud’s theory of religion, it is necessary to have some knowledge of the biographical record. To be sure, theories of religion, or theories of anything, are never formulated entirely in the abstract or in a vacuum. Additionally, one cannot fully grasp Freud’s theory of religion without at least having a basic understanding of his psychosexual theory of human development. We can detect a distinct trajectory in the evolution of Freud’s life and thought, from his early experiences with an unheroic father to

his formulation of the psychosexual stages of human development to his theorizing about religion. The lynchpin in his theory of development, which also became the core of his theory of religion, is, of course, the Oedipus complex. Occurring during the phallic stage of psychosexual development, between the ages of three and six, the Oedipus complex becomes the defining moment of personality development and identity formation for the young boy. The boy, so the theory goes, feels a sexual attraction to his mother, whom he would like to possess and have all to himself. There is, however, one problem and major obstacle: The mother already belongs to the more powerful father. The father becomes, as it were, the young boy's rival for the attention and affection of the mother. But at such a young and tender age, the boy, fearing the dangerous consequences that will result from harboring such illicit thoughts and wishes, has no choice but to repress his primal desire. If he does not, according to Freud, he risks losing his mother's love and, more important, the protection of his father. The boy, as it turns out, simply cannot take that risk.

Freud's theory of psychosexual development is, first and foremost, a theory of *masculine* personality development and identity formation. The same can be said of his theory of religion, as we will soon see. While it is true that the young girl also experiences an Oedipus complex of sorts, she does not have to contend with the same level of primal fear. The most she has to fear is the withholding of love from her mother, as punishment for wanting to be the father's lover. What the young girl does not have to fear is the loss of protection by her parents. The threat of losing a parent's love is, to be sure, a powerful deterrent in and of itself. However, when coupled, as in the case of the young boy, with the threat of the loss of the father's protection, it has a far deeper impact upon such a fragile and developing psyche. Here is where Freud introduced the concept of the superego, which comes into existence at the end of the oedipal period of development. Recall Freud's tripartite model of the human psyche: the id, governed by the principle of immediate pleasure and the gratification of instinctual drives; the ego, the mediator between immediate pleasure and the reality of the external world and its standards and values; and the superego, the dimension of personality that contains the internalized moral standards and values of society, transmitted to the young child by way of the representatives of society, the parents. At the end of the oedipal period of development, the boy represses the primal desire to possess the mother, and because he fears losing his father's protection, he identifies with the father by internalizing the father's moral standards and values. And because the father functions as the representative of society, the boy is really internalizing the standards and values of the culture. What we witness, according to Freud, "is nothing short of the triumph of culture; the young child is fast becoming a self-regulating member of society." Said another way, the function of authority previously carried out, externally, by the child's parents is now carried out, internally, by way of the emerging superego (Bingaman, 17–18).

As the repository of the moral standards of society and the ideals and values of culture, the superego is closely linked with the need for religion. The superego emerges at a crisis moment in the young child's development, in response to the primal feelings of helplessness and vulnerability and the threat of the loss of love and protection. Similarly, the need for religion emerges, in Freud's view, in response to the very same set of circumstances and the very same emotional responses: crisis, helplessness, powerlessness, vulnerability, the need for love and protection, and so forth. As children, we await the day when we will enter the world of adulthood and leave behind these childish feelings and emotions. But as adults know only too well, the feelings of helplessness and vulnerability do *not* suddenly disappear when we reach adulthood. In fact, sometimes the feelings are intensified because the crises that we now face have multiplied exponentially. On top of the crisis having to do with the threat of losing the parent's love and protection is the threat of, for example, the loss of employment, economic misfortune, marital troubles and divorce, family turmoil, natural disasters, terrorism, and illness and death. The helplessness and vulnerability that we hoped we would outgrow someday does not go away and instead becomes more intense and pervasive. Not that we are always in a heightened state of crisis and vulnerability. We could very well be riding the wave of fortune and success and good luck and perfect health at this particular moment, but lurking in the back of every adult's mind is the disquieting knowledge that eventually, one day, all good things will come to an end. Then, in the midst of a crisis or crises, the feelings of helplessness and vulnerability, which we thought we had outgrown, resurface in ways that are most unsettling.

It is extraordinary that seventy years after his death, Freud still has much relevance to today's post-9/11 world. For example, his view of religious faith is that it stems from the Oedipus complex of early child development, when the young and vulnerable child must, to secure the love and protection of the father, internalize without question the father's moral standards and religious values. Later, as adults, we conform to a set of standards and values anytime we feel anxious and fearful and helpless in the face of the threatening forces of life. We align ourselves with a particular ideology and/or theology because it is similar to how we coped as children. Freud's view of religion does not capture the totality of religious experience, let alone healthy religious experience, but it does have particular relevance to the fear-based forms of religion that are rearing their heads again in today's world. With the resurgence of nationalism and religious fundamentalism, Freud's psychology of religion can teach us a great deal about the oedipal images of God that have the capacity to do great harm to ourselves, others, and the planet.

For Freud, this situation becomes the origin or the source of the whole need for religion. In moments of crisis the adult will reexperience the helplessness and vulnerability of childhood—specifically, the helplessness and vulnerability of the oedipal years—and will once again long for and seek something or Someone more powerful with the capacity and the power to provide consolation and protection in the midst of the dangers of life. The need for religion, then, can be traced to the oedipal years of development, for it is fundamentally a reactivation of the need for consolation and protection. Only, this time, the more powerful Parent is of a divine nature, whose power and capacity to love and protect immeasurably surpass those of any earthly and human parent. Freud, writing in *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, pointed out:

The roots of the need for religion are in the parental complex; the almighty and just God, and kindly Nature, appear to us as grand sublimations of father and mother, or rather as revivals and restorations of the young child's ideas of them. . . . Religiousness is to be traced to the small human child's long-drawn-out helplessness and need for help; and when at a later date he perceives how truly forlorn and weak he is when confronted with the great forces of life, he feels his condition as he did in childhood, and attempts to deny his despondency by a regressive revival of the forces which protected his infancy. (123)

Not everyone agreed with Freud that the origin of the need for religion can be traced to the oedipal years of development. For example, his friend Romain Rolland, the French writer and philosopher, informed Freud that the source of religious sentiments is the “oceanic feeling” of oneness with the mother. This origin would locate the need for religion at a much earlier point of development, namely, the beginning of life or even earlier, when one is in utero. Those who embrace the oceanic feeling of oneness with the mother as the origin of religious feelings and sentiments point out that religion is ultimately about the yearning to rediscover a paradise that was lost. Indeed, it would take the neo-Freudians to establish that the *preoedipal* years, from birth until around the age of three, are just as important as, if not more important and foundational to development than, the oedipal years of classical psychoanalytic theory. Moreover, this finding would not reinforce Freud's theory of the need for religion so much as that of someone like Rolland. Erik Erikson, the neo-Freudian psychoanalyst, linked very early development with the origin of religious sentiments. The establishment of basic trust, Erikson argued, fundamental to the first few months of life, is a prerequisite to healthy development throughout the entire life span. Furthermore, religion, in its healthier manifestations, reinforces and solidifies the basic trust that was established in the earliest months of life.

Freud, therefore, has had his share of critics taking exception to his view that the oedipal years are the cornerstone of human development and

personality formation. Nor could the same critics accept that religious faith is always traceable to the regressive revival of oedipal forces, most notably, the father of childhood who offered his love and protection in exchange for the young child's loyalty and obedience. Freud, characteristically, was unswayed by emerging critiques that would locate the need for religion in the earliest weeks and months of life. For him, religious feelings and sentiments, in every time and place, could be traced directly to the need for the oedipal father of childhood. Upon reaching adulthood, the human individual discovers, much to his or her disappointment, that life does not get any easier but instead becomes infinitely more complicated and challenging. We long for the security and consolation and, above all, the protection that we received as children from our parents. But upon reaching adulthood, we come to the realization that our parents are all too human and that it was a childish illusion ever to believe that they could offer us protection and security from every crisis and misfortune. In response to the reactivated feelings of helplessness and vulnerability we experience as adults, we project onto the screen of the universe a Rorschachian divine being and heavenly parent who is supremely powerful and seemingly capable of offering eternal protection and security. In short, the repressed memory of the oedipal father of childhood is reactivated whenever we are in the midst of a crisis situation, but instead of looking to an earthly father for consolation and protection, we as adults begin to turn to a heavenly Father, who we believe can offer us eternal care and solace. As Freud put it so eloquently, we are forced to look beyond an earthly father for comfort and protection—beyond the human race, for that matter—to “a benevolent Providence which . . . will not suffer us to be a plaything of the overmighty and pitiless forces of Nature” (*Future of an Illusion*, 19).

Again, certain critics of Freud, even other unbelievers, took exception to the rigidity of his view that religious feelings and sentiments can always be traced directly back to the oedipal father of childhood. Why, for example, can the longing for consolation in the face of life's hardships and disappointments not be traced back to the oceanic feeling of oneness with the *preoedipal* mother of very early childhood? For Freud, the answer was rather straightforward: The mother is, in fact, the young child's protector in the earliest days of life, but when the child reaches the preschool years and the oedipal drama commences, evoking very strong feelings of fear and helplessness and vulnerability, the child must, out of necessity, look to the more powerful father in order to feel safe and secure. Moreover, by the end of the Oedipus complex, the child will have internalized the moral standards and values of the father, that is, the standards and values of society. And thus the superego is born and the child is on the way to becoming a self-regulating member of society. In time, however, when we are forced to confront the more menacing crises of adulthood, we, again out of necessity, begin to look beyond the father of childhood to a more powerful, benevolent Providence that can shield us from the dangers of adult life. The need for religion is therefore rooted in the need

for consolation and protection, and as such it is a regressive revival of the *oedipal* forces of childhood. In a time of crisis, the image of the oedipal father, who once gave to the young child a feeling that all is right with the world, is revived or reactivated. Freud put it this way: "The mother, who satisfies the child's first hunger, becomes its first love-object and certainly also its first protection against all the undefined dangers which threaten it in the external world-its first protection against anxiety, we may say. In this function the mother is soon replaced by the stronger father, who retains that position for the rest of childhood" (*Future of an Illusion*, 24).

It is not surprising or coincidental that Freud had a great deal to say about the need for protection, particularly the need for feeling protected by the "stronger father" of childhood, in light of the powerful memory of his father's humiliation. From a developmental standpoint, the age of eleven is a pivotal and formative time, when it is hoped that a boy can take comfort in feeling protected by his father. Later, as the adolescent boy approaches adulthood, he will have to be more accepting of reality and of the fact that his father is human, too, that he is not as omnipotent as the boy had hoped. But by then, the boy will have matured emotionally and will be better able to cope with the harsh realities and necessities of human life. To hear, at eleven, your father recount his painful ordeal of humiliation matter-of-factly, without any sense of righteous indignation, would be, to state the obvious, rather unsettling if not traumatic. That the heart of Freud's psychosexual theory of development and his psychology of religion happen to be the longing for comfort, consolation, and protection from, respectively, a strong oedipal father and the image of a strong oedipal father projected onto the screen of the universe is very understandable, given the nature of his relationship with his own father. Jacob Freud had been humiliated and had done nothing about it, but even more, he had not seemed to care about doing anything about it. Freud would never feel protected by his father, Jacob, nor would he look to the heavens for the protection of a heavenly Father, who, in his estimation, was little more than a figment of one's imagination, the hope or, more precisely, the *wish* for what can never be. The human individual, therefore, has no choice but to grow up into reality or, in the language of psychoanalysis, to exchange the pleasure principle of feeling eternally protected by a heavenly Father for the reality principle of facing life head-on without the need for any illusions or fantasies. As Rizzuto noted perceptively, Freud's quasi obsession with the nature of religious faith and its impact on the human individual and the human race "sounds like a muffled complaint about his family. . . . He never complained overtly about his parents, but the forcefulness of his sentences [about religion] hints at suppressed suffering and rage displaced onto God and the absence of protection" (262–263).

By 1910, Freud had already fully reached the conclusion that the father complex of childhood is inextricably connected to one's belief in God; the two, as it were, go hand in hand. "Psychoanalysis," wrote Freud in

Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood, “has made us familiar with the intimate connection between the father-complex and the belief in God; it has shown us that a personal God is, psychologically, nothing other than an exalted father” (123). Even by 1901, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud had determined that God—or more precisely, one’s belief in God—is a psychological projection of our own human need and longing onto a perceived benevolent Providence with the capacity to keep us safely in its care in this world and the next. It is not, Freud argued, that God has created us in his image, but that we have created God in ours. The verse of Judeo-Christian scripture, “God created man in his own image,” from the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis, can, according to Freud, be reversed in light of the findings of psychoanalysis: “Man created God in his [own image]” (19). These findings have to do with Freud’s research into the nature of the unconscious and how, in that vast subterranean region of the human psyche, the hopes and fears and images and memories of childhood become timeless and therefore indestructible. When, upon reaching adulthood, we discover that we still feel as helpless as ever in the face of crises and hardships, we seek comfort and protection from the image of the strong oedipal father that we have projected onto a perceived divine benevolent Providence. Religious feelings and sentiments recapitulate the oedipal drama of early childhood, nothing more and nothing less. While human beings may in fact, at a very primitive level, long for the security associated with the oceanic feeling of oneness with the mother, the more powerful and *zeitlos* images that prompt us to create God in our own image stem, most fundamentally, from our deeply ingrained need to feel protected by the stronger oedipal father.

ILLUSION AND ERROR

God, in Freud’s view, is a regressive attachment to the image of the oedipal father of childhood projected onto the image of a perceived more powerful divine Providence. As such, it must be considered an illusion, as Freud pointed out so forcefully in his classic work on the nature of religious faith, *The Future of an Illusion*, published in 1927. It is important to remember that by *illusion* Freud did not necessarily mean an error or a falsehood or even a delusion. The religious believer, in other words, is not necessarily delusional or taking a protracted stance of willful misunderstanding. Rather, illusion, particularly a religious illusion, reflects very powerful *wishes* buried deep within the human psyche, wishes that have to do with basic needs like the need for comfort, consolation, security, and protection. Interestingly, Freud was not mean-spirited in his assessment of religious faith as a wish fulfillment of very powerful human needs and longings. He acknowledged with the believer that it is perfectly understandable to wish for consolation and protection in the midst of the storms of human life, but it is not desirable to cling, with childish

tenacity, to an illusion that is divorced from reality. Thus illusions derive from human longings and wishes; that is, the religious believer is deeply motivated to believe in a loving and omnipotent divine Providence. We must make sure to distinguish illusions from delusions, and not to misconstrue them as interchangeable and synonymous. As Michael Palmer notes, “a delusion is a false belief, a contradiction of reality, but an illusion is not necessarily erroneous.” He continues:

This distinction between illusion and delusion is an important one. In calling religion an illusion Freud is not saying that religious beliefs are necessarily false but rather that they must satisfy the believer's wishes: they could be true, although this is unlikely. A further characteristic of an illusion follows on from this. Illusions set little store by verification. Unlike empirical assertions, therefore, the assertions of religion are not based on observations of the external world which can be either verified or falsified, but rather on inner convictions that neither seek nor require rational justification. Thus, when the question of corroborating evidence is raised, religious people appeal to the authority of their ancestors, to ancient texts which have been handed down to them, or even argue that it is wrong to raise questions of authenticity, punishing those that do. The last point, says Freud, is bound to rouse our deepest suspicions, because it can only mean that society is all too well aware that religious doctrines lack conviction or rational support, and that this is something that no appeal to our ignorant ancestors can allay. (34)

Freud, however, was considerably less patient with the human individual when it came to the matter of *clinging* to the illusion of a benevolent divine Providence. As in the context of psychotherapy, Freud was noting, almost empathically, that it is quite understandable that religious believers yearn for a benevolent Providence to look after them and those they hold dear, but as in the case of the resistant client who willfully refuses to let go of certain problematic behaviors, beliefs, and/or ideas, it is no longer in their best interests and the interests of the human race to do so. It is simply not in the best interests of the human race to cling to an illusion that stunts the emotional and intellectual growth and development of so many people. This is especially true in light of the emergence of science, which Freud believed could take us further in our development and evolution as a species. It must be remembered that Freud was deeply invested in the spirit of the Enlightenment and therefore championed science as the best hope for humankind. Why? Science, particularly the scientific approach of psychoanalysis, is firmly grounded in reality rather than illusion. Freud put it this way at the end of *The Future of an Illusion*: “No, our science is not an illusion. But an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere” (56). And by “elsewhere,” Freud was, of course, referring to religion and to the illusion of divine consolation and protection that derives from the early longings and wishes of childhood, both the childhood of the human individual and that of the human race.

Religion, as far as Freud was concerned, had outlived its usefulness; that is, the time had come for human beings to collectively leave their childhood behind and enter the realm of adulthood. In psychoanalytic terms, what Freud was describing, with his argument that science must supersede religion, was the importance of growing up into reality, of exchanging the pleasure principle represented by religion for the reality principle represented by science.

"Religious ideas . . . are illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes. As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection—for protection through love—which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place."

—Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (30)

Not that Freud was consistently empirical and scientific in his own research. For example, in *Totem and Taboo*, written in 1913, Freud came to the extraordinary conclusion that the religious faith of the believer can be traced all the way back not only to the early days of his or her childhood, but to the earliest days of the human race. As we have seen, Freud was convinced that religious faith and belief in God recapitulates the Oedipus complex of the human individual, but in *Totem and Taboo* he took his research even further by arguing that it also recapitulates the Oedipus complex of the species. How so? According to Charles Darwin's research into humankind's primitive beginnings, the earliest of our ancestors supposedly lived in hordes dominated by a very powerful male leader. Freud, building on the work of Darwin, theorized that the male leader, because of his authority and power, was possessive of all the women of the horde. The other males of the horde were either killed or driven off by the leader, so that he could have every female for himself. "One day," Freud wrote in *Totem and Taboo*, "the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde" (141). The other males now had access to the women of the horde, but it came at a steep price: They no longer had the protection of their tribal leader, and to make matters worse, his blood was now on their hands. To atone for their "sin," and to assuage their guilt, the other males created

a father substitute of sorts, the totem, and instituted a totem meal that had as its focus the sacrificing of a totem animal. "In eating together the sacrificed totem animal, a direct substitute for the murdered father, the brothers could identify with the father and consequently acquire a measure of his strength and power" (Bingaman, 37). It is not too difficult to see the parallels with the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper in the context of the Christian tradition.

Freud's, at best, quasi-scientific research into the history of totemism led him to the conclusion that the origin of religious feelings and sentiments is the Oedipus complex, both that of the human individual and the collective Oedipus complex of the human race. Residual traces of both of these lie dormant in the human psyche, waiting to be reactivated in times of crisis. But to whom can we turn to feel consoled and protected? For millennia, perhaps longer, there has not been a powerful leader of the horde to turn to, nor can we turn to the father of childhood, who, as we soon discover, is not so powerful after all. In moments of crisis and hardship, when we face the storms of life and feel every bit as helpless as we did when we were children, we instinctively reactivate the memory of the father of childhood and, deeper in the recesses of the unconscious, the primordial memory of the powerful father of the primal horde. Freud was hoping for the day when, through science, there would be a complete eradication of the Oedipus complex from the human psyche. Paul Ricoeur has noted that "the 'dissolution' of the Oedipus complex is attained only with the notion of an order of things stripped of any paternal coefficient, an order that is anonymous and impersonal" (327). This is, to be sure, a rather stark and stoic approach to life, but for Freud the developmental goal for human beings, both personally and collectively, was a progressive education to reality, to life as it is instead of how we would like it to be. That day, however, is somewhere in the future, illustrated by the pervasive influence of religion. Rather than being dissolved, the memory of the oedipal father from one's childhood and from the early days of the human race is "projected anew onto the idealized object of religious worship and devotion, onto God the Father Almighty. Submission to the idealized object recapitulates the early days of childhood—both the boy's and that of the human race—when the boy lived in fear of a more powerful father, but was nevertheless assured of the father's protection" (Bingaman, 41).

Freud's psychology of religion is grounded in a spirit of renunciation, which, in his mind, was in keeping with the postreligious spirit of science. It is true, as Mark Edmundson observes, that Freud was seemingly more open to the Jewish faith of his youth. We read in *Moses and Monotheism* that Judaism, as opposed to Christianity, "began with the prohibition against making an image of God develops more and more in the course of centuries into a religion of instinctual renunciations" (18). It therefore represents a progressive leap forward in terms of cultural and intellectual development, surpassing the more primitive views of the Christian religion. Freud saw belief in a Christian God "as functioning to fulfill wishes for protection and resulting in restriction of

intellect,” whereas “the stringent intellectual renunciations that began and were continued within the Jewish tradition have, in Freud’s view, strengthened spiritual and intellectual (*geistig*) faculties, thereby ushering in valuable psychological and cultural advances” (Van Herik, 143–144). Still, while Judaism represents an evolutionary leap forward, it cannot completely eradicate the image of the oedipal father from the human psyche and the need to take refuge in our infantile illusions. Only science, in Freud’s estimation, has the capacity to lead us into a world governed by reality, completely free of the “universal obsessional neurosis” known as religion. As he put it, at the end of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, “I have not the courage to rise up before my fellow-men as a prophet, and I bow to their reproach that I can offer them no consolation: for at bottom that is what they are all demanding—the wildest revolutionaries no less passionately than the most virtuous believers” (145).

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Sam Harris

Jenin Younes

After nineteen Muslim men hijacked four planes and flew two of them into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, Americans began to contemplate the role of religion in anti-U.S. terrorism. While many believed that the terrorists embraced a warped form of Islam that was not representative of the true religion, or that the attacks were a response to social and economic problems in the Middle East or to U.S. foreign policy in the region, others saw the attacks as a direct result of the religious convictions of the hijackers. Since September 11, Sam Harris has advocated this explanation for the terrorist attacks and in doing so has become one of America's most prominent critics of religion.

Harris was born in Los Angeles, California, in 1967. His father, now deceased, was a Quaker, and his mother is Jewish, although he describes his upbringing as nonreligious. He dropped out of Stanford when he was nineteen after a life-changing experience with the mind-altering drug MDMA (also known as ecstasy) when he decided to travel the world, studying Buddhism and meditation and reading countless books about religion. He became interested in the philosophy of the mind and in 1997 returned to Stanford and completed a degree in philosophy.

He wrote a number of unpublished works and remained uncritical of religion in general until September 11. The events of that day transformed his perception of religion. As he says, "I could have told you what is wrong with religious dogmatism on September 10th. But after 9/11, I realized the role that religious moderation played in providing cover for fundamentalism" (Segal). On September 12, Harris began writing *The End of Faith*. By October 2005 his book was number four on the *New York Times* best seller list, where it remained for thirty-three weeks. It received the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for First Nonfiction in 2005. The following year, Harris published *Letter to a*

Christian Nation in response to criticisms of his first book. *Letter to a Christian Nation* entered the *New York Times* best seller list at number seven in October 2006. In addition to writing books and articles criticizing religion, giving talks on the subject, and engaging in debates with advocates of religion, Harris is currently working on a PhD in neuroscience. Specifically, he is attempting to differentiate belief, nonbelief, and uncertainty at the level of the brain.

Arguably, Harris's most controversial claim is the thesis of both *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*: Religious moderates must be held accountable for religious fundamentalism. By accepting unjustified beliefs and demanding respect for such convictions, moderates pave the way for fundamentalism (*End of Faith*, 14–15). In other words, if religious beliefs are held to be beyond rational scrutiny, the convictions of fundamentalists as well as moderates go unchallenged. If we are to rid ourselves of the dangers of religious fundamentalism, we must begin to question the validity of the religious beliefs of moderates and fundamentalists alike. An honest inquiry will show us that religious beliefs are by their very nature unjustified and thus unworthy of respect (22–23).

In all areas of life except religion, Harris tells us, we insist that a belief must correspond to observed reality. We do not think we are “free” to believe anything about science or history, and we demand evidence for any proposition made in these areas; anyone who believes things about chemistry or history without evidence is not likely to be taken seriously by the rest of us. However, people have collectively agreed that religious claims are inherently different and thus do not require evidence (*End of Faith*, 50–51). This practice is inconsistent, Harris argues, as religious claims are in fact no different from other kinds of propositions. “People of faith claim nothing less than knowledge of sacred, redeeming, and metaphysical truths: *Christ died for your sins; He is the Son of God; All human beings have souls that will be subject to judgment after death.* These are specific claims about the way the world is” (68). As claims about the world, religious beliefs should be subjected to the same critical and empirical analysis as any other assertion.

Of course, the faithful do not claim to have evidence for their beliefs; rather, they invoke faith. They just *know*, through personal revelation or otherwise, that their beliefs are true. In reality, religious faith, according to Harris, is nothing more than “unjustified belief in matters of ultimate concern” (*End of Faith*, 65). Faith is the last resort of religious people when they do not have good reasons to justify their beliefs.

Harris points out that not only do we lack justification for religious propositions, but we have evidence that religious “truths” are false. Consider, for example, the age-old problem of evil: If God is all-good and all-powerful, then why do terrible things happen to good people? Although theologians have wrestled with this dilemma for centuries, they have not been able to provide a satisfactory explanation. Moderates contend that God is mysterious

and beyond comprehension, so we cannot understand why little girls get raped and tortured or hundreds of thousands of people are killed in a tsunami. Yet we judge God's goodness according to human standards of morality; we "know" God is good because of our independent ideas about goodness. Furthermore, Harris writes, "any God who could concern Himself with something as trivial as gay marriage . . . is not as inscrutable as all that" (*Letter to a Christian Nation*, 55). Thus God cannot be outside the realm of human comprehension. In the face of so much evil in the world, we must conclude that God is either evil or impotent, in either case rendering him unworthy of human worship. The only remaining explanation is that God does not exist. Harris regards this as the best explanation, since there is no evidence for the existence of an evil or impotent God ("An Atheist Manifesto").

In addition to the invalidity of faith as a justification for belief and the problem of evil, Harris tells Christians that they ought to consider the existence of other faith groups and the fact that these groups hold their beliefs as strongly as Christians do.

Every devout Muslim has the same reasons for being a Muslim that you have for being a Christian. And yet you do not find their reasons compelling. The Koran repeatedly declares that it is the perfect word of the creator of the universe. Muslims believe this as fully as you believe the Bible's account of itself. . . . Why don't you lose any sleep over whether to convert to Islam? Can you prove that Allah is not the one, true God? Can you prove that the archangel Gabriel did not visit Muhammad in his cave? Of course not. But you need not prove any of these things to reject the beliefs of Muslims as absurd. . . . Understand that the way you view Islam is precisely the way devout Muslims view Christianity. And it is the way I view all religions. (*Letter to a Christian Nation*, 7)

A pivotal argument throughout both *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation* is that religion should be abandoned because it is not merely false but also dangerous—so dangerous, in fact, that unjustified religious beliefs are likely to end civilization as we know it. Harris asks the reader to consider the threat that religious, especially Islamic, fundamentalists with access to weapons of mass destruction pose to the world. The September 11 terrorists, Harris argues, were motivated by their religion. The argument that poverty, lack of education, or other social problems drove the terrorists simply won't hold, as these men were well-educated, middle-class Muslims (*End of Faith*, 33).

While all religions are problematic, Islam poses the greatest threat to the world for two reasons. First of all, the fundamentals of Islam are a problem (*End of Faith*, 148). Islam is a religion of conquest, spread through the military action of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers. The Quran and the Hadith (oral traditions of the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), upon which Islamic tradition is based, are saturated with admonitions to Muslims to convert, subjugate, or kill all non-Muslims. The doctrine of jihad

is especially troubling. Although many moderate Muslims claim *jihad* can be translated as “struggle” or “striving,” in reality most Muslims understand *jihad* to mean “holy war” in defense of Islam. In this context, jihad calls for military conquest until the world has converted to Islam or submitted to Muslim rule (110). We should be equally disturbed by the Islamic belief that a Muslim killed defending or spreading Islam is guaranteed a place in paradise. Undoubtedly, Harris writes, this doctrine of martyrdom and paradise convinced the September 11 hijackers to carry out their deadly mission (29).

The second reason Islam is more problematic than Christianity or Judaism is that unlike these latter two religions, Islam has not been tempered by Enlightenment thought. Many Christians and Jews embrace religious moderation because they have incorporated secular ideas, from ethics to science, into their worldview. As Harris writes, “Religious moderation springs from the fact that even the least educated person among us simply *knows* more about certain matters than anyone did two thousand years ago—and much of this knowledge is incompatible with scripture.” Thus religious moderates cherry-pick the parts of the Bible that they like and ignore the unpleasant ones (*End of Faith*, 18–19).

According to Harris, a truly moderate form of Islam that is critical of Muslim extremism does not exist. So-called moderate Muslims are still fundamentalists by Western standards; they believe the Quran to be the literal, inerrant word of the one true God. Whether Muslims are considered moderate or fundamentalist has to do with the extent to which they believe political and military action to be intrinsic in their faith (*End of Faith*, 111).

Although Islam is more of a threat to civil society than is religion in the West, we cannot ignore the problems caused by Christian literalists, especially in the United States. Most modern Christians do not deny their religion’s bloody history, from the Crusades to the torture and execution of heretics during the Inquisition to the anti-Semitism derived from the New Testament and perpetuated throughout Christendom for the last two thousand years (*End of Faith*, 97). Yet Christians generally overlook the unnecessary harm caused by the beliefs of Christian fundamentalists in the West, Harris argues. Fundamentalist Christians uncompromisingly support Israel’s expansion into the West Bank and Gaza, damaging chances for peace, because they believe that the Jews must occupy the entire region before the Second Coming of Christ can occur (153). For religious reasons, Christian fundamentalists also resist scientific and technological innovations that could save countless lives. For example, scientists have found a vaccine for the human papillomavirus (HPV), which causes the deaths of five thousand women annually from cervical cancer; religious conservatives in government, however, have resisted a vaccination program, arguing that HPV prevents premarital sex. Similarly, Christian conservatives have successfully pressured the federal government to outlaw stem cell research because they consider the destruction of a three-day old human embryo (a collection of 150 cells) murder. The promise of stem cell

research cannot be overstated, as preliminary research suggests that it could cure every disease or injury imaginable (*Letter to a Christian Nation*, 26–29).

According to Harris, Christians are working every day to undermine American schoolchildren's scientific education by opposing the teaching of evolution and advocating the teaching of intelligent design or creationism in public schools. Contrary to the claims of some Christians, evolution is not disputed or doubted within the scientific community; the theory of evolution is as firmly established as germ theory or the theory of gravity. To deny children an understanding of evolution is to deny them a proper scientific education (*Letter to a Christian Nation*, 68–69). These are only a few examples of the damage Christianity is doing in the modern world. As Harris writes, "The degree to which religious ideas still determine government policies—especially those in the United States—presents a grave danger to everyone" (*End of Faith*, 153).

What about all the good done in the name of religion? Don't we need religion in order to be ethical? According to Harris, the answer to both of these questions is no. In fact, a closer look at these issues will show us that religion impedes ethical behavior. First of all, the idea that the Bible can serve as a perfect moral guide is preposterous. The Bible tells us that we must "stone people to death for heresy, adultery, homosexuality, working on the Sabbath, worshipping graven images, practicing sorcery, and a wide variety of other imaginary crimes" (*Letter to a Christian Nation*, 8). While we may accept some of the Bible's morality, such as Jesus' Golden Rule, the fact that we reject other parts of Scripture, like the admonition to stone adulterers to death, shows that we do not derive our morality from the Bible. On the contrary, we have intuitions about what is morally right, and we pick the parts of the Bible that fit these intuitions ("Myth of Secular Moral Chaos," 18).

"It is time we recognized that all reasonable men and women have a common enemy. It is an enemy so near to us, and so deceptive, that we keep its counsel even as it threatens to destroy the very possibility of human happiness. Our enemy is nothing other than faith itself."

—Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, 131

A rational approach to morality becomes possible when we realize that questions about right and wrong are really questions about the happiness and suffering of others. If we have the ability to affect the happiness or suffering of other sentient beings, then we have a moral obligation toward them ("Myth of Secular Moral Chaos," 18). The problem with religious "morality," according to Harris, is that it tends to separate morality from concerns about the suffering and happiness of others. As a result, religious "morality" often *causes* unnecessary suffering. For example, Christian missionaries preach against

condom use in sub-Saharan Africa, where millions die from AIDS each year, causing countless people to suffer and die unnecessarily. Similarly, consider a Muslim's "moral" obligation to kill a daughter who has been raped, in order to save the family's honor. Again, these religious beliefs *cause*, rather than alleviate, human suffering (*Letter to a Christian Nation*, 25–26).

If religion were a necessary precursor to morality, we would expect nonbelievers to be less moral than people of faith. Although believers frequently point to Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot as evidence in favor of this argument, Harris contends that while these tyrants may have been atheists (although in Hitler's case evidence suggests that he was a Christian), their atheism did not cause them to commit crimes against humanity; they committed these crimes because they were megalomaniacal, racist, and delusional ("Myth of Secular Moral Chaos," 18). Their regimes were not beacons of rationality or free-thinking; rather, communism, like Nazism, was "little more than a political religion." Anyone who questioned or resisted the policies and assertions of these leaders was carted off and executed (*Faith*, 79). The problem in these cases was uncritical acceptance of secular dogma, not skeptical inquiry and critical thinking. In Harris's words, "I know of no society in recorded history that ever suffered because its people became too reasonable" (18).

In fact, societies in which people are rational and skeptical seem to flourish. Harris writes that by all measures, the most atheistic countries in the world, including Sweden, Belgium, Canada, Australia, Iceland, Japan, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom, are the healthiest in terms of life expectancy, adult literacy, per capita income, educational attainment, gender equality, homicide rate, and infant mortality. At the same time, the overwhelmingly religious United States is plagued with high rates of homicide, abortion, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and infant mortality. While correlation does not imply causation, at the very least it is safe to conclude that lack of belief in God does not lead to moral chaos (*Letter to a Christian Nation*, 43–45).

Unlike many other atheists, Harris maintains a strong interest in "spirituality" or "mysticism," although he cautions against misinterpretation of his use of the terms. In defending his interest in this area, Harris claims that most of us have found that "health, wealth and good company" are not sufficient for human happiness. Whether our happiness comes from professional success or eating our favorite food or taking a drug, these pleasures are fleeting, and much of the time our minds are filled with unpleasant, neurotic thoughts. Harris believes we may be able to cultivate our consciousness in order to transform our experience of life and become more than productive members of society. Harris calls this quest "spirituality" (*End of Faith*, 204–206). He lends some credence to Eastern religion and meditation as providing spiritual instruction in contemplative disciplines, although he argues that we must dispense with the superstitious dogma that accompanies them. Harris emphasizes that our spiritual searches must remain entirely rational. Mysticism, he

writes, “is a rational enterprise. Religion is not. The mystic has recognized something about the nature of consciousness prior to thought, and this recognition is susceptible to rational discussion. The mystic has reasons for what he believes, and these reasons are empirical” (221).

Harris also parted ways with many fellow atheists in September 2007 when he delivered a controversial and somewhat ill-received speech at the American Atheist 2007 Convention. In this speech, Harris argued against the use of the word *atheism*. Not only should atheists stop using the word, he said, but they should not replace it with synonyms like *rationalist*, *humanist*, *bright*, *free-thinker*, or *antitheist*. Harris explained that his rejection of these terms is both philosophical and strategic. First of all, we should not need a word for non-belief in God, just as we do not need a word for a person who does not believe in astrology. The lack of belief in God is the only sensible position, as is non-belief in astrology. Harris contends that “all we need are words like ‘reason’ and ‘evidence’ and ‘common sense’ and ‘bullshit’ to put astrologers in their place, and so it could be with religion” (“Problem with Atheism,” 5).

Another reason that atheists should reject such labels is that they make nonbelief sound like a worldview or a philosophy when it is not. It allows those who advocate reason and evidence to be labeled as a marginal interest group, rather than rational people who demand evidence for claims. Furthermore, the term *atheism* allows the opposition to dismiss “militant atheists” in one fell swoop without responding to specific claims or arguments. In other words, critics who disagree with Harris and other high-profile atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens frequently cite a single claim made by one of these figures, sometimes out of context, and dismiss all atheists, and their arguments, on the basis of this statement (“Problem with Atheism,” 12). Likewise, most religious people think they have a “knockdown argument against atheism,” for example, that atheists can’t prove God doesn’t exist. Harris argues that as long as we continue to use the word *atheist*, we will continue to be confronted with these arguments, allowing believers to dodge the fundamental questions (24).

Sam Harris did not think of himself as an atheist before being invited to speak as one; he simply considered himself a rational person who did not believe claims without sufficient evidence. For this reason, as well as the misunderstandings he believes the term *atheist* invites, he did not once use the word *atheist* or any of its derivatives in *The End of Faith*. Instead, he repeatedly stressed terms like *evidence* and *reason* to combat religious propositions.

Although Harris has won the support of many people and has even “deconverted” some Christians, he has received criticism from atheists and believers

alike. Critics from both camps frequently accuse him of being simplistic, dogmatic, and as fundamentalist in his views as religious literalists. Physician and atheist Theodore Dalrymple, for example, denounces Harris's "sloppiness and lack of intellectual scruple," claiming Harris (along with other "new atheist writers") makes no argument he himself could not have made at age fourteen (Dalrymple, 13). Similarly, Reza Aslan, Muslim author of *No God But God*, claims that Harris makes the same mistake as Muslim fundamentalists in reading scripture literally (Segal). Some consider Harris's intolerance of all religion not only simplistic but bigoted and irrational. In a pointed attack on Harris's biases, Kenan Malik of the *Sunday Telegraph* writes that *Letter to a Christian Nation* reveals "not simply the bigotry and irrationalism of religion but also that such bigotry and irrationalism can take more than one form" (15).

Many theologians, atheists, and religious moderates contend that Harris's tactics push moderates into the same camp as fundamentalists, alienating potential allies in fighting crucial battles such as separation of church and state. Van Harvey, a retired Stanford professor of religious studies, states, "Secular humanists like Harris ought to be concerned with allies, to win fights on questions like the separation of church and state. But Harris isn't concerned about the political implications of his arguments, because he thinks that anything supernatural is evil" (Segal).

In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Harris's response to these criticisms, he maintained that his indictment of religious moderates is just and valid. Until critique of religion, both moderate and fundamentalist, becomes the norm, fanatics will continue to hold dangerous beliefs. The argument that his reading of Scripture is grossly oversimplified and as literal as that of the fundamentalists he fears is nonsense, he says, because many people do take the words of the Bible or the Quran literally. The events of September 11 and the campaigns of many Christians to outlaw gay marriage prove this. Even if no one did take religious texts literally, we would still have a problem:

Even if everyone decided that none of these texts is divine, it would still make sense to ditch them, since it would only be a matter of time before someone picked one up and said, "Hey, the creator of the universe hates homosexuals." We have to start seeing religion for what it is, a failed science, a failed description of the world, a holdover of discourse by our ancestors, who had no basis to demand good evidence and good argument. (Segal)

In response to accusations of "bigotry" or "racism," arising from his especially passionate critique of Islam, Harris has written, "This charge is almost too stupid to merit response." His criticisms, he writes, have nothing to do with the skin color of the people whose beliefs he is challenging, but the beliefs themselves. He spends more time criticizing Islam, he argues, because he believes Islam is the most dangerous major religion ("Response to Controversy," 21–22).

Harris has also received criticism, primarily from nonbelievers although from some believers as well, for his endorsement of meditation and Eastern religion. Writer and journalist John Gorenfeld, for example, writes of Harris, “Our country’s foremost promoter of ‘reason’ is also supportive of ESP, reincarnation and other unscientific concepts.” Gorenfeld claims that instead of Jesus, Harris has advocated choosing from a “menu of Messiahs” from the East. According to Gorenfeld, Harris, like the religious moderates he criticizes, has also “picked and chosen” what he likes from religion (Gorenfeld, 25). Similarly, journalist Daniel Blue contends that meditation as a consciousness-altering tool is thus far unsupported by scientific evidence, and that Harris’s claims to the contrary are little more than “wishful thinking.”

Harris has responded to these criticisms, arguing that he does not accept any propositions on faith or without sufficient evidence. He maintains that the field of parapsychology has been “unfairly stigmatized,” and that if scientists begin to explore telepathy or the effects of prayer, he will be interested to know the results. He emphasizes that the fact that he has spent no time conducting such research himself should “suggest how worthy of my time I think such a project would be.” On the other hand, Harris argues that he is convinced meditation and other contemplative practices can provide the practitioner with a transformative experience. This position does not entail his acceptance of any metaphysical propositions based upon such experiences; on the contrary, he has repeatedly rejected such claims (“Response to Controversy,” 18).

Harris received substantial criticism, almost exclusively from nonbelievers, for his speech at the American Atheist 2007 Convention. President of American Atheists Ellen Johnson and fellow atheist P. Z. Myers accused him of recommending that nonbelievers stop publicly criticizing religion and of hiding from the label *atheist* out of “shame and fear” (Myers, “Letter,” 8; Johnson, “Ellen Johnson Responds,” 11). Myers argues that the term *abolitionist*, like *atheist*, was used to unify a group that identified itself in the negative (nonbelief in slavery) (“Letter,” 4). In a reply to Harris’s response to his first article, Myers wrote, “Sam Harris is living in a fantasy world if he thinks he can criticize religion and merely by leaving the A-word off, he will win everyone over to his point of view. It won’t. The theists aren’t stupid” (Myers, “Sam Harris Seems like a Nice Fellow,” 15).

In response, Harris has written that Myers, Johnson, and others have misconstrued his argument. He objects to the term *atheist* not because he is ashamed to be a nonbeliever or because he thinks atheists should not continue to argue against religion, but because the term “invites a variety of misunderstandings that are harmful to our cause.” Moreover, many Americans have no belief in God and would like to see religion kept out of public policy and science but also have no interest in joining an atheist organization or identifying themselves as opponents of religion. By labeling themselves *atheists*, nonbelievers are alienating others who would identify with specific causes (“Response to My Fellow ‘Atheists,’” 8).

Harris, with his relentlessly provocative and controversial opinions, has changed the discourse about religion in America. Before Harris, most nonbelievers and secularists restricted their criticism of religion to fundamentalism; Harris's indictment of religious moderates as complicit in the problems caused by fundamentalism has made his views unique and his work groundbreaking. He has torn down the wall that sheltered the beliefs of the religious moderates from criticism and successfully encouraged others to do the same. Together with his conviction that religion is not harmless nonsense, but dangerous nonsense, his criticism of moderates has forced theists to answer some very difficult questions.

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Thomas Henry Huxley

Sherrie Lyons

Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) appointed himself Darwin’s bulldog, claiming that he was prepared to go to the stake if necessary to defend Darwin’s theory of evolution (*Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley* [hereafter *LL*], 1.188). For many Huxley is primarily known as a popularizer of evolution. This does not begin to do justice to either his stature as a scientist or the depth of his thought on a variety of issues. His brilliance became apparent when he was quite little. Even though father was a teacher his schooling was irregular. He was mostly self-taught, and even when he was a young boy, his curiosity led him to read about a staggering array of subjects. From James Hutton, he learned about geology. From his reading of Sir William Hamilton’s “The Philosophy of the Unconditioned,” he embraced the skepticism that typified his mature thought. From Thomas Carlyle he developed sympathy for the poor that was later reinforced by his exposure to the squalor and poverty he saw in the East End of London when he was attending medical school. He taught himself German to read Goethe and Kant in the original. This knowledge of German would serve him well in later years, allowing him to become acquainted with the tremendous biological advances being made in Germany, which few English men of science were able to follow. He also had an intense interest in metaphysical speculation, engaging everyone he could find on questions such as the nature of the soul and how it differed from matter.

Huxley began studying medicine at quite a young age and received a scholarship to the medical school attached to Charing Cross Hospital. Except for physiology, most of the medical curriculum bored him, and he never practiced as a physician. Nevertheless, he graduated with honors but was so young that he was initially not eligible for a physician’s license. Like many others who made their mark in the natural sciences, Huxley took a voyage around the world as the assistant surgeon on the HMS *Rattlesnake* (1846–1850).

This voyage resulted in some of his most important scientific work. In Australia he met his future wife, Henrietta Anne Heathorn. They married in 1855 and had a long and happy marriage and seven children.

Huxley's life was one of incessant activity. He lectured at the School of Mines and was also a professor at the Royal College of Surgeons. Evenings were often spent speaking before working men or learned societies. He was president of numerous societies, including the British Association for Advancement of Science (BAAS), the Geological Society, and the Ethnological Society. He played a crucial role in educational reform, particularly in advocating the teaching of laboratory sciences in the schools. Actively engaged in research in physiology, morphology, and paleontology, Huxley worked tirelessly to see basic biological research recognized as legitimate in its own right, separate from the medical school curriculum.

HUXLEY AND AGNOSTICISM

Huxley's interests were not confined to science. He loved music, art, and literature and was a member of two famous London clubs: the X Club and the Metaphysical Society. In the Metaphysical Society of London leading intellectuals, politicians, and clergymen met to debate and discuss philosophy, metaphysics, theology, and religion. The society provided the perfect forum for Huxley to present his views on these topics. However, he felt he did not quite belong because most of his colleagues

were *-ists* of one sort or another. . . . I, the man without a rag of a label to cover himself with, could not fail to have some of the uneasy feelings which must have beset the historical fox when, leaving the trap in which his tail remained, he presented himself to his normally elongated companions. So I took thought and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of "agnostic." It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the "gnostic" of Church history who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant; and I took the earliest opportunity of parading it at our Society, to show that I too had a tail like the other foxes. (*Collected Essays*, 5.239)

Huxley's witty account of how he invented the word *agnostic* belies the importance and seriousness of his thought in describing his own philosophical framework to differentiate it from other kinds of isms, including positivism, materialism, atheism, and even empiricism.

The word caught on, and numerous agnostic societies sprang up that dealt with religious belief. Yet Huxley was not deeply engaged with them, and it was only at the end of his life that he wrote a series of essays that specifically defended agnosticism. Typically, agnosticism is placed on a spectrum somewhere between the absolute certainty of religious belief and the total denial of the existence of God by atheists. However, this was not Huxley's original meaning.

Rather, for Huxley agnosticism defined an epistemological claim about the limits of knowledge. Building on the Kantian principle that the human mind has inherent limitations, further elaborated by Hume, Huxley maintained that our knowledge of reality is restricted to the world of phenomena as revealed by experience.

Agnosticism is perceived as having an antireligious bias, in part because Huxley was well known for his polemics against theology. Yet Huxley pointed out with much pleasure that in coming to his conception of agnosticism, he had been influenced by the High Church Anglican Henry Mansel's lectures entitled *The Limits of Religious Thought*. Mansel had argued that because God was a transcendental being, his true nature was beyond the limits of human cognition. For Huxley, God was not the only entity that was unknowable. As an epistemological claim his agnosticism did not just apply to religious views but also placed limits on the kinds of phenomena science could explain as well. Nevertheless, Huxley was first and foremost a scientist, and he firmly believed that science was the path to knowledge.

Theological and metaphysical questions interested Huxley, but he regarded science and philosophy as occupying distinct domains. On questions that were not amenable to the scientific method, those that went beyond the capabilities of the five senses, he declared himself an agnostic. He had no reason for believing in immortality, but he also had no means of disproving it. Furthermore, for Huxley immortality was "not half so wonderful as the conservation of force or the indestructibility of matter. Whoso clearly appreciates all that is implied in the falling of a stone can have no difficulty about any doctrine simply on account of its marvellousness" (LL, 1.234).

It was not that Huxley thought the question of immortality unimportant, but he did not think it was fruitful to try to study problems that at the present stage of human knowledge were unsolvable. For Huxley the existence of immortality was such a problem. It could be argued, however, that for Huxley importance was synonymous with solubility. Immortality, the nature of personality, the existence of ego, and the nature of consciousness were questions concerning which "the human intellect flounders at once out of its depth." It was only the use of the intellect, rather than emotions or imagination, that would lead to any real progress in trying to solve these problems. Huxley did not believe his was an antireligious stance:

Science seems to me to teach in the highest and strongest manner the great truth, which is embodied in the Christian conception of entire surrender to the will of God. Sit down before fact as a little child, be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly whenever and to whatever abysses nature leads, or you shall learn nothing. I have only begun to learn content and peace of mind since I have resolved at all risks to do this. (LL, 1.235)

Science was a better instructor of the spirit than the Bible, the church, or theology.

Huxley drew distinctions not only between theology and science, but also between theology and religion. Science and theology, while distinct, belonged to the realm of the intellect as they both made empirical claims about the nature of the world. Therefore theological claims must be subject to the same standards of proof as scientific ones. Religion belonged to the realm of feeling, and influenced by Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, Huxley claimed a deep sense of religion was compatible with the entire absence of theology. All topics of our thought could be classified as belonging to either the realm of the intellect, "something that could be put into propositions and affirmed or denied," or the realm of feeling, which is "called the aesthetic side of our nature and which can neither be proved nor disproved, but only felt" (*Collected Essays*, 3.175). When running for the London School Board in 1870, Huxley even advocated the reading of the Bible, claiming that religious feelings were an essential basis for good conduct and the Bible was a valuable tool in instilling these feelings. While pragmatic politics certainly played a role in his advocacy of Bible reading, he also made similar arguments in later essays and private letters.

Huxley argued that the secularists were misguided in their demand for the abolition of religious teaching when what they really wanted was to free education from the church and all it represented politically, socially, and intellectually. In one of his many attacks on William Ewart Gladstone, Huxley even accused secularists of fabricating the antagonism between science and religion. Shortsighted religious people "confound a certain branch of science and theology with religion," while "equally short-sighted scientific people forget that science takes for its province only that which is susceptible to clear intellectual comprehension." Beyond those areas they "must be content with imagination, with hope, and with ignorance" (*Collected Essays*, 4.160–161).

THE WAR BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND SCIENCE

While Huxley often articulated his distinction between theology as dogma and religion as feeling, it is also true that Huxley was far more interested in "attacking the dogma, rather than in developing the feeling" (Barton, 265). For Huxley, science was at war with theology and there could be no compromise between the two. He associated theology with the unquestioning following of authority, which was totally antithetical to the scientific method. Theology would become "scientific" when the Scriptures were treated as a collection of ordinary historical documents and analyzed with the research methods of philology, archaeology, and natural history. In certain theological circles such a view was emerging. The higher criticism—a school of biblical scholarship that sought to trace the sources and origins of the various books of the Bible—was using precisely that approach in interpreting the Scriptures. While Huxley applauded such developments in theology, he believed that the

march of civilization was the result of the progress of science. Huxley did not deny the existence of the nonmaterial or spiritualist world, but he claimed that at the present time there was no way of having any knowledge of it. Science represented the triumph of the natural over the supernatural, of fact over superstition, of knowledge over ignorance.

Huxley was often called a materialist, but he firmly rejected this label. He maintained that two worlds existed—the physical and the psychical—and although they were intimately related and interconnected, the bridge between the two had not been found. He articulated the two distinct approaches of science and philosophy in contributing to knowledge of the world in his essay on René Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (*Collected Essays*, 1.166–198). For Huxley, Descartes stood at the branch point between philosophy and science of the modern world. One branch had led by way of George Berkeley and David Hume to Immanuel Kant and idealism, while the other, by way of Julien Offray de La Mettrie and Joseph Priestley, had led to modern physiology and materialism. The two paths shared the ideal that one should not believe any propositions except those for whose truth is so clear and distinct that they cannot be doubted. Descartes' "consecrated doubt" provided Huxley with the guiding principle for his work.

Huxley insisted that the two paths were not antagonistic: "Descartes' two paths meet at the summit of the mountain, though they set out on opposite sides of it" (*Collected Essays*, 1.194). However, metaphysics and physics could only be reconciled by each recognizing its own limitations. Materialists must acknowledge that all our knowledge of nature was known to us only through our consciousness, and the metaphysicians had to admit that progress in the understanding of consciousness could be made only by the methods and formulas of science.

Although Huxley claimed that the two branches were necessary, in actuality physics made up the bulk of his tree of knowledge. At best metaphysics was only a minor twig, and in many of his writings the twig was diseased. Better to cut off the twig because it endangered the growth of the whole tree. His idiosyncratic definition of materialism split it between both branches. He placed materialistic terminology on the branch of physics, while materialist philosophy went on the twig of metaphysics. Materialist methodology had led to tremendous advances in physiology and psychology. He agreed with the philosophical materialists that the "human body like all living bodies is a machine." Eventually all its properties, including consciousness, would be explained on physical principles, when we should "arrive at a mechanical equivalent of consciousness, just as we have arrived at a mechanical equivalent of heat" (*Collected Essays*, 1.191).

Huxley was drawing a rather subtle distinction between materialist methodology and materialist philosophy, and it was a materialist methodology that he followed in his own quest for knowledge. For his 1868 lecture "On the Physical Basis of Life" he appeared before an Edinburgh audience with a

bottle of smelling salts, water, and various other common substances. He claimed that he had all the basic ingredients of protoplasm or what he translated as the “physical basis of life.” All organisms shared a unity of form and a similar chemical composition, and although plants and animals appeared to be very different, no sharp dividing line existed between the simplest of these organisms. The difference between living and nonliving matter lay in the arrangement of the molecules. Even thoughts “are the expression of molecular changes in the matter of life which is the source of our other vital phenomena” (*Collected Essays*, 1.154). It certainly is not surprising that Huxley, in expressing such ideas, was called a materialist.

Anticipating the criticism he would receive from such remarks, he continued, “What do we know of this terrible ‘matter’ except as a name for the unknown and hypothetical cause of states of our own consciousness? And what do we know of that ‘spirit’ . . . except this is also the name for an unknown and hypothetical cause or condition of states of consciousness?” (*Collected Essays*, 1.160). We only know the material world through our consciousness, that is, by the ideal world. The philosophical materialists were guilty of “grave philosophical error” in claiming that there is nothing in the universe, but matter, force, and necessary laws.

Huxley touched on the problem of necessity. The law of gravity says that a stone will fall to the ground, but it is quite another thing to say that it *must* fall to the ground. Empirical observation could not unequivocally prove such a claim. A law was a rule that had always been found to hold and that we expected always would hold. In this regard Huxley was following Hume rather than Descartes. The fundamental doctrines of philosophical materialism, like those of spiritualism, were outside the limits of philosophical inquiry, and Hume had provided a clear demonstration of what those limits were.

Hume referred to himself as a skeptic, but Huxley believed that this label did not do justice to the power and subtlety of Hume’s intellect. Many questions were not worth being skeptical about. If someone asked Huxley what were the politics of the inhabitants of the moon, he was not being skeptical when he said he did not know. How could anyone know? While Huxley acknowledged that many questions piqued our interest, Hume had demonstrated that they were essentially questions of lunar politics. But the investigation of nature had a higher purpose than merely satisfying our curiosity. In a world full of misery and ignorance, he thought every person had a duty to try to leave it “somewhat less miserable and somewhat less ignorant than it was before he entered it” (*Collected Essays*, 1.163).

Huxley claimed that it didn’t matter whether matter was regarded as a form of thought or thought was regarded as a form of matter, because each statement had a certain relative truth. But he preferred the terminology of materialism because it suggested a method of inquiry into all phenomena, including the nature of thought, by study of the physical conditions that were accessible to us. He maintained that the “spiritualist terminology is utterly barren and

leads to nothing, but obscurity and confusion of ideas" (*Collected Essays*, 1.164). Yet it appears that Huxley was referring not just to terminology, but to a method of inquiry, and by describing the spiritual terminology as "barren" and "leading to confusion," he certainly was implying that spiritualistic metaphysics itself was barren. For Huxley materialism might not answer everything, but spiritualist metaphysics answered nothing, even if it posed interesting questions.

Huxley attacked Auguste Comte in another attempt to distance himself from the materialists. He thought Comte knew nothing about physical science and maintained that anything that was positive in the positivism of Comte could be found in the earlier writings of Hume. More important, he thought Comte's philosophy was antiscientific in spirit, describing it as "Catholicism *minus* Christianity" (*Lay Sermons*, 133). In characteristic acerbic style Huxley had succeeded in offending both Catholics and Comtians alike. But he had essentially condensed and paraphrased what Comte had written in his treatise *Philosophie Positive*. Comte had stated that his idea was Catholic organization without Catholic doctrine—in other words, "Catholicism *minus* Christianity." Comte had advocated the establishment of a "modern spiritual Power" that would have control over public opinion and education. He did not think there was any point in doubting scientific principles that had been established by competent persons. For Huxley, nothing could be more antiscientific than such a suggestion. Progress had been made only by people who had not been hesitant to doubt established beliefs.

One might quibble over whether Huxley was a materialist, but his anticlericalism cannot be doubted. Comte's philosophy was permeated by the "papal spirit" and thus ensured Huxley's attack. There could be "neither peace nor truce" between agnosticism and clericalism. Huxley did not rule out the possibility of genuine religious experience, but he objected to Catholicism and most organized religions because of the authority structure they relied on to foster belief. Theology asked one to believe statements about the nature of the world without any evidence or, even worse, when the evidence clearly contradicted church teachings. Contributing a chapter entitled "The Reception of the *Origin of Species*" to *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, Huxley claimed he did not have any a priori objections to the creation account of Genesis as embodied in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Pen dripping with sarcasm, he continued, "Far be it from me to say that it is untrue because it is impossible. I confine myself to what must be regarded as a modest and reasonable request for some particle of evidence that the existing species of animals and plants did originate in that way as a condition of my belief in a statement which appears to be highly improbable" (*Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* [hereafter *LLD*], 1.541).

Huxley was interested in understanding the natural world; theology obscured that understanding, while Darwinism went a long way in furthering it. The great lesson of the scientific method was that something should be

"I begin to understand your sufferings over the *Origin*. A good book is comparable to a piece of meat, and fools are as flies who swarm to it each for the purpose of depositing and hatching his own particular maggot of an idea" (March 17, 1869; *LL*, 1.323). Huxley complained to Darwin that people misconstrued his agnosticism, claiming that he was a materialist, a positivist, or an atheist. For someone with as skeptical a mind as Huxley, nothing could be more unjust than accusing him of something so rashly positive as atheism. "My fundamental axiom of speculative philosophy is that materialism and spiritualism are opposite poles of the same absurdity—the absurdity of imagining that we know anything about either spirit or matter."

—Thomas Henry Huxley, *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*, 1.262

believed only when there was no possibility of refuting it. Thus the discussion had come full circle, returning to Descartes's guiding principle of doubt.

HUXLEY AND DARWIN

Huxley's doubt was not doubt just for doubting's sake, "born of flippancy and ignorance" (*Collected Essays*, 1.170). Rather, Huxley's whole intention was to arrive at certainty. He adopted such a position in his attitude toward Darwin's theory. In his famous review of *The Origin of Species* in the *London Times*, Huxley maintained that although Darwin's theory explained a great deal about the natural world, he preferred to adopt Goethe's aphorism "*Thatige Skepsis*," or active doubt, in evaluating it (*Darwiniana*, 20). Indeed, he was skeptical of the two basic tenets of Darwin's theory: natural selection and gradualism. Pre-*Origin*, Huxley did not believe in transmutation because the work of Karl Ernst von Baer, Georges Cuvier, and his own investigations suggested that organisms could be grouped into discrete types and that no transitional organisms existed between them. He had his own well-established research program in developmental morphology long before he took up the cause of evolution. While his work from the *Rattlesnake* superficially appeared to be a series of detailed monographs on various invertebrates, he had a much more ambitious agenda. He wanted to provide a theoretical foundation for taxonomy in order to understand how form came to be generated, and the concept of type was crucial to that endeavor. With the publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, Huxley recognized that the unity of type he was observing was due to descent from a common ancestor. But Huxley argued that saltation, or evolution by "jumps," better described the geological record, with its abrupt appearance of most forms, than the gradual change that Darwin advocated. On the eve of the publication of *The Origin* he cautioned

Darwin, “You have loaded yourself with an unnecessary difficulty in adopting *Natura non facit saltum* so unreservedly” (LL, 1.189). Saltation allowed Huxley to explain the gaps in the fossil record, to accept evolution, and to maintain a belief in the concept of type. He eventually converted to gradualism as more and more transitional organisms were found, such as *Archaeopteryx* and the birdlike dinosaurs. However, he remained skeptical of natural selection his entire life.

Huxley had no doubt that natural selection occurred in the wild, but he was not convinced that it had the power to do all things that Darwin had claimed. He was optimistic that physiological experiments eventually would provide definitive proof that natural selection had the power to create new species and not just well-marked varieties. However, until artificial selection had actually demonstrated the creation of varieties, incapable of interbreeding with one another, Huxley claimed, the logical foundation of the theory of natural selection remained incomplete. Huxley’s doubts about the efficacy of natural selection sharpened Darwin’s own thinking about the problem of hybrid sterility and resulted in his performing a number of experiments that he might otherwise not have done. For a while he agreed with Huxley that if he could show that sterility was accounted for, his theory would be on stronger ground. Although Darwin returned to his original position, that sterility was an incidental by-product of differences in the reproductive organs of the parent species, Huxley’s skepticism contributed to a strengthening of this position. Huxley’s reservations did not prevent him from immediately recognizing the potential of Darwin’s theory. Even before *The Origin* was published, Huxley wrote Charles Lyell, “I by no means suppose that the transmutation hypothesis is proven or anything like it. But I view it as a powerful instrument of research. Follow it out, and it will lead us somewhere; while the other notion is like all the modifications of ‘final causation,’ a barren virgin” (LL, 1.187).

DEFENDING DARWIN

In spite of Huxley’s doubts over various aspects of Darwin’s theory, he became the foremost defender of evolutionary theory in the English-speaking world. Huxley’s tremendous antagonism toward natural theology is often attributed to his belief in Darwinism. However, his enthusiasm for evolution was due, in part, to the absence of theology in Darwin’s theory. Darwin’s theory was a purely naturalistic explanation of the history of life, free of any argument from design or supernatural causation. Huxley proselytized the virtues of evolutionary theory wherever he went, using the theory to promote his larger political agenda of making science rather than the church the source of moral authority and power in society. In a famous encounter at the 1860 Oxford meeting of the BAAS, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce asked Huxley whether

“it was on his grandfather’s or his grandmother’s side that the ape ancestry comes in.” Huxley’s response was that

man has no reason to be ashamed of having an ape for his grandfather. If there were an ancestor whom I should feel shame in recalling it would rather be a man of restless and versatile intellect—who, not content with an equivocal success in his own sphere of activity, plunges into scientific questions with which he has no real acquaintance, only to obscure the by an aimless rhetoric, and distract the attention of his hearers from the real point at issue by eloquent digressions and skilled appeals to religious prejudice. (*LL*, 1.199)

Huxley’s response created pandemonium. According to one account, ladies fainted.

Huxley correctly perceived that the most threatening aspect of Darwin’s theory was its significance for human origins, and this area was where he initially devoted most of his energy. While scientists argued whether natural selection could account for species change, whether change was saltational or gradual, and a myriad of other aspects of the theory, these questions did not make up the fundamental quarrel with *The Origin*. Rather, opponents of Darwin’s theory attacked his book by claiming it was materialistic, atheistic, and worse. In the spring of 1861 Huxley decided to devote his weekly lectures for working men to “The Relationship of Men to the Rest of the Animal Kingdom.” The lectures were quite popular, and he quipped to his wife, “By next Friday evening they will all be convinced they are monkeys” (*LL*, 1.205). In the next two years he refined and added to his various lectures and published *Man’s Place in Nature* in 1863, eight years before Darwin published his *Descent of Man*. In it Huxley argued eloquently and powerfully that human beings are no exception to the theory of evolution.

People were fascinated by the similarity of apes to humans. The exact relationship of humans to other primates had long been a subject of intense debate among taxonomists as well as capturing the imagination of the public. Do apes think? Are they moral beings? Do they have societies? The intermingling of facts and mythology had resulted in much confusion over the classification of these animals. Were present-day human races derived from distinct species or just varieties of one species? In spite of this great interest in “man’s place in nature,” most people were deeply opposed to anything that broke down the barrier between humans and the rest of the animal world, as it would undermine the basic tenets of Christianity. Huxley’s approach to the problem was twofold. First, he believed that the classification of humans should be determined independently of any theories of origination of species. Such a position removed the question of human ancestry from theological concerns. If he could demonstrate unequivocally the close relationship between apes and humans, he believed, this demonstration would be the most powerful support for Darwin’s theory, because Darwin had provided a clear, logical explanation for the existence of those relationships. But Huxley recognized that many people would be

appalled by the idea of an ape as an ancestor. He argued passionately and articulately that a pithecoïd ancestry in no way degraded humankind.

Huxley realized that before he could discuss anatomical and physiological evidence, he had to convince his audience that such a view in no way detracted from the dignity of humankind. He claimed that it didn't matter whether man's origin was distinct from that of all other animals or whether man was the result of modification from another mammal. Human dignity, according to Huxley, was not inherited, but "to be won by each of us so far as he consciously seeks good and avoids evil, and puts the faculties with which he is endowed to its [*sic*] fittest use" (*Scientific Manuscripts of Thomas Henry Huxley* [hereafter *SM*], 2.472). For Huxley, all aspects of human nature, both "brutishness" and "princely dignity," would have to be accounted for independently of the question of human origins. If he could convince his readers that the highly charged issues concerning man's morals and ethics, questions of good and evil, were not relevant to the question of human origins, the problem of classification could be investigated objectively and dispassionately. Therefore Huxley did not directly address the problem of whether humans were descended from an apelike ancestor. Instead, he asked how closely related were apes and humans, approaching the question just as a taxonomist would investigate how closely related were the cat and the dog.

The question should be strictly a scientific one that could be resolved by the facts of comparative anatomy and physiology, "independently of all theoretical views." Darwin's theory, special creation, or any other theory need not even be mentioned in the investigation of the "facts" of anatomy and physiology. After such facts were established, one could comment on how well a particular theory fit the facts. And Huxley believed the facts were well known. All the evidence from comparative embryology and comparative anatomy showed that the differences between humans and the higher apes were no greater than those between the higher and lower apes. Citing numerous authorities, he demolished Richard Owen's claim that the hippocampus was a unique structure in the brain of *Homo sapiens*. If Darwin's hypothesis explained the common ancestry of the apes, then it followed that it also explained the shared origin of apes and humans.

Not only was there a similarity in anatomical structures, but it was also apparent that animals shared certain mental attributes with humans. Huxley appealed to the Victorians' love of their pets to demonstrate the unity of humans with the animal world: "The dog, the cat . . . return love for our love and hatred for our hatred. They are capable of shame and sorrow; and . . . no one who has watched their ways can doubt that they possess that power of rational cerebrations which evolves reasonable acts from the premises furnished by the senses" (*SM*, 2.473). Thus Huxley claimed a psychical as well as physical unity existed between man and beast.

Another kind of evidence that argued for the common ancestry of apes and humans was fossils. The first Neanderthal fossils were discovered shortly after

the publication of *The Origin*. Huxley recognized that the Neanderthals were not significantly different from modern humans and correctly anticipated that the finds of paleontology would push the origin of humans back to a far earlier epoch than anyone had previously imagined. If humankind was that ancient, clearly this was evidence against the creation hypothesis. The Darwinian hypothesis was the only hypothesis that could make sense of these ancient human fossils.

It was hard to imagine how anyone could deny their ape ancestry after reading Huxley's superb presentation of the facts of development and comparative anatomy. But Huxley knew that beliefs run deep and that many people would still be horrified by the inevitable conclusions to be drawn from his analysis. Many would argue that "the belief in the unity of origin of man and brutes involves the brutalization and degradation of the former." But Huxley asked if that was really so. In a passionate entreaty, he claimed that man's dignity did not depend on his physical characteristics or his origins:

It is not I who seek to base Man's dignity upon his great toe or insinuate that we are lost if an Ape has a hippocampus minor. . . . On the contrary, I have done my best to sweep away this vanity. . . . Is it, indeed, true, that the Poet, or the Philosopher, or the Artist whose genius is the glory of his age, is degraded from his high estate by the undoubted historical probability, not to say certainty, that he is the direct descendant of some naked and bestial savage. . . . Is mother-love vile because a hen shows it, or fidelity base because dogs possess it? (*Collected Essays*, 7.152–154)

Just because we share admirable traits with the lower animals does not make those traits less admirable. Furthermore, Huxley argued that man's lowly ancestry was "the best evidence of the splendour of his capacities." Only humans were capable of intelligible and rational speech, which made possible the development of culture and civilization. Even if humans came *from* the brutes, they were not *of* them. Clearly, Huxley believed, a vast chasm separated us from the rest of the animal world.

With more fossils constantly being discovered, Huxley continued his research on fossils and classification, all providing evidence for evolution. Comparative embryology and anatomy demonstrated many similarities between reptiles and birds. In 1868 Huxley made an extremely provocative and prophetic suggestion: Dinosaurs were the antecedent form between reptiles and birds. Although *Archaeopteryx* had many reptilian features, it was still a bird and therefore could not be considered a true connecting link between reptiles and birds. A large number of small birdlike dinosaurs had recently been discovered. Since not all the dinosaurs showed these modifications, they were evidence in favor of gradualism because they showed a series of modifications, from bones that were very reptilian to ones that were virtually indistinguishable those of from birds. Ever the skeptic, however, Huxley

did not think that the evidence unequivocally proved that birds had arisen through gradual modification of a dinosaurian form, but only that such a process *may* have taken place. For Huxley, truly demonstrative evidence would be to find a series of forms that progressed in a steplike manner showing the metamorphosis of a reptilian-like dinosaur into a birdlike dinosaur into a bird. He was confident that older rocks would reveal birds more reptilian than *Archaeopteryx* and reptiles more birdlike than these dinosaurs, eventually obliterating completely the gap between the two groups. Another kind of evidence for the close relationship between birds and dinosaurs that Huxley found especially compelling existed in certain species of present-day birds. Particular bones in the dorking fowl, if found in a fossil state, would be indistinguishable from those of a dinosaur. Moreover, if it were somehow possible to enlarge and fossilize the hindquarters of a half-hatched chicken, the chicken would be classified as a dinosaur. The dinosaurs provided crucial evidence in support of gradual evolution because they represented transitional organisms across the boundaries of widely separated classes.

As his work on the relationship of birds to reptiles indicates, Huxley was ever the empiricist, gathering vast amounts of evidence before coming to more general conclusions. He continued to emphasize the “facts” that evolution explained. Yet underlying much of his scientific work and, even more, his popular writing, his desire to keep theological questions distinct from scientific ones served as a powerful rhetorical strategy to convince people of his position. For the most part such a strategy served him extremely well. However, his war against theology sometimes interfered with his interpretation of the evidence. In the nineteenth century one of the most heated debates concerned progression in the fossil record.

By the 1830s most geologists thought that the stratigraphical record documented that the earth was several hundred thousand years old and that more complex organisms appeared over time. However, Huxley agreed with Charles Lyell’s minority viewpoint, maintaining that some types seemed to persist unchanged through vast periods of geological time. While a strong case could be made against progression through the 1840s, the fossil discoveries in the next decade made the antiprogressive position more and more untenable. By 1863, even Lyell had acknowledged progression in the organic world with the exception of humans. Yet Huxley continued to argue against it. Undoubtedly Huxley’s belief in the type concept played a role in his rejection of progression, but he still could have argued that distinct persistent types progressively appeared in the fossil record. However, Huxley associated progression with the argument from design. Many paleontologists looking for a way to reconcile the findings of geology with Christianity argued that the progressive pattern of earth history was evidence for the argument from design. Ironically, as long as Huxley was unable to dissociate progression from the idea of design, he continued to ignore the increasing evidence in favor of progression. Huxley’s linking of progression to transmutation and the idea of a divine plan is

most clearly seen in his scathing review of Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*.

In 1844 the anonymous publication of *Vestiges* set Victorian England abuzz, presenting an evolutionary account of the history of life, although couched in the language of natural theology. It was continually reprinted, and in 1854 Huxley reviewed the tenth edition. Opening with a quote from *Macbeth* ("Time was that when the brains were out, the man would die"), Huxley wondered why *Vestiges* had not shared a similar fate. Although *Vestiges* presented a naturalistic account of the history of life, it claimed that the order of events was the result of natural laws, which the author then attributed to the action of a Creator. The primary natural law Chambers cited was progression. Huxley acknowledged that progression was a scientific proposition that could be accepted or rejected according to the available evidence, but he did not think the evidence supported progression. However, even if the record was progressive, "it would not be . . . an *explanation* of creation; such creation in the manner of natural law would . . . simply be an orderly miracle." Huxley believed "natural laws" were "nothing but an epitome of the observed history of the universe" (*SM*, supplement, 5) Huxley was trying to separate a scientific proposition (whether or not the fossil record was progressive) from metaphysical speculations (i.e., that the Creator worked in a lawlike fashion). In *Vestiges*, progression was inextricably linked with the presence of a Creator, and theological arguments were mixed with scientific ones. This approach ensured Huxley's wrath. According to Huxley, what appeared to be a scientific discussion of the organic world was nothing more than an elaborate version of the book of Genesis.

However, Huxley's vitriolic attack on *Vestiges* is doubly ironic. First, his antitheological rhetoric left him open to the same criticism he had of his opponents. And second, while most scientists claimed it was the poor science of *Vestiges* that they objected to, underneath their professional criticism was the fear that the naturalistic explanation of creation threatened the special status of humanity and their most deeply held religious views. Furthermore, although publicly Darwin was highly critical of *Vestiges*, he realized it had a lot more in common with his own theory than he would have liked to admit. Chambers had used many of the same kinds of evidence—embryology, the fossil record, classification, and comparative anatomy—that Darwin had gathered for his own theory of species change through time. Later Huxley agreed, writing, "The only review I ever have qualms of conscience about, on the grounds of needless savagery, is the one I wrote on the *Vestiges*" (*LLD*, 1.542). In struggling to free science from theological implications, Huxley let his own philosophical beliefs influence his interpretation of the data. However, Huxley was certainly not unique in this respect. Like the creationists he despised, he made many important contributions to the issue of progression in the fossil record and its relationship to evolutionary theory.

Darwin's theory had far-ranging implications, and Huxley wrote on virtually all of them, from what it had to say about the origin of life to what it said about the origin of ethics. The conflicts surrounding Darwinism were complex and cannot be reduced to an analysis that just describes science at war with religion. Huxley was guilty at times of oversimplifying the relationship between the two. Many people had found a way to reconcile evolution with their religious belief. However, for the most part Huxley's anticlerical views and his desire to keep theology totally separate from science served him well in his defense of Darwinism. He correctly recognized that the battle for the acceptance of evolution had to be fought on theological grounds, not just in the public arena, but within the scientific community as well. Theological objections were at the root of most criticisms of Darwin no matter how sophisticated the arguments appeared to be scientifically. Charles Lyell, who had a great influence on both Huxley and Darwin, finally accepted evolution, but with one serious caveat, that of man. He never accepted the evolution of humans from a lower form, ultimately because of his religious views regarding the dignity of man (Bartholomew, 261). Richard Owen also regarded evolution as a threat to the special status of man. By referring to natural selection as the law of higgledy-piggledy, Sir John Herschel implied that the complexity of living organisms could not have arisen by such a chancy mechanism.

"'I never cared for gossip in my life, and disembodied gossips such as these worthy ghosts supply their friends with, is not more interesting to me than any other' was Huxley's response to Alfred Wallace's request to attend a séance (Marchant, 418). Wallace had independently come up with the theory of natural selection but later came to believe that natural selection was guided by a higher spiritual force. Huxley did not accede to Wallace's request, but he did to Darwin's. Darwin attended a séance in 1874 with the medium Charles Williams, but he left the room at the crucial moment. When he returned everything had been strewn all over, and he was told that the table had been lifted over the heads of those who had been sitting around it. A week later, Huxley, incognito, attended another séance with Williams. He wrote to Darwin, giving a detailed report of the séance and describing the various phenomena, but also describing how they could have been produced. He concluded that Williams was 'a cheat and an impostor.'"

—*Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley*, 1.455

By 1871 the quality of the critiques of Darwinism had improved significantly. Nevertheless, even those who supported evolution often distorted Darwin's view in order to reconcile it with a belief that God still played a role in

shaping the history of life on earth. Both the Duke of Argyll and Asa Gray cast evolution within the old idealist version of design. An outstanding example of someone who had tried to reconcile Darwin's theories with Christianity was St. George Mivart, who accepted evolution but believed that it was constrained along certain lines by the Creator. He also maintained that evolution was compatible with the teachings of the church. He had received much of his scientific training with Huxley, for whom he had profound respect. Mivart was no scientifically ignorant religious fundamentalist, but a colleague and friend who was a product of Huxley's own teaching. Therefore Mivart's later views were a profound disappointment to Huxley. Mivart raised a series of scientific objections concerning why natural selection could not account for the origin of species. Yet Huxley for the most part chose to ignore these objections in his review of Mivart's *Genesis of Species*. He appeared to be more interested in promulgating his anti-Catholicism than in defending Darwinism. Some of the objections that Mivart had raised were ones that Huxley had raised as well, such as the importance of saltations. Huxley had never hesitated to point out his criticisms of Darwin's theory, but he still supported it. This two-pronged strategy had been very powerful. So why did he change his tactics?

First, Huxley believed that he, along with others, had already addressed the various scientific objections to evolutionary theory. Second, Huxley again wanted to argue that theology had no place in science and maintained that most objections to Darwin's theory were theologically based. Mivart had been Darwin's most persistent critic, and if Huxley could demonstrate that even Mivart's objections were ultimately rooted in theological belief, this demonstration would powerfully support Huxley's assertion about the basis of the criticisms. Huxley's critique of Mivart was exactly in the spirit of Mivart's attack on Darwin. Darwin agreed with Huxley's emphasis, writing Huxley, "It will be a long battle, after we are dead and gone as we may infer from Malthus even yet not being understood" (*LLD*, 2.327). Because of theological objections, acceptance of his theory would be a long time coming.

Huxley was maintaining not just that the theory of evolution provided a better description of the organic world than teachings of the church but also that science and theology were fundamentally incompatible: "The contradiction between Catholic verity and scientific verity is complete and absolute, quite independently of the truth or falsehood of the doctrine of evolution" (*Darwiniana*, 138). For those who believed in evolution, the teachings of the church were utterly false, but for those who believed that Catholic doctrine was correct then evolution must be false. There was no middle ground for Huxley.

Huxley continually used Darwin's theory as a vehicle to attack theology, but these attacks should not overshadow Huxley's appreciation of the theory as a scientific theory—as a complete history theory of the nature of the organic world. In spite of Huxley's emphasis on "the facts," he also recognized the great theoretical power of *The Origin*, claiming that there was "no field of biological inquiry in which the influence of *The Origin of Species* is not

traceable” and that “as the embodiment of an hypothesis, it is destined to be the guide of biological and psychological speculation for the next three or four generations” (*Darwiniana*, 228). How prophetic were Huxley’s words!

THE EMERGENCE OF SOCIAL DARWINISM

Huxley had no doubt we shared a common ancestor with the apes, but following his general strategy of keeping scientific questions separate from philosophical and ethical ones, he did not write on evolutionary ethics for many years. However, the relationship of ethical and evolutionary theory to the history of philosophy was something that deeply interested him. In 1892 George Romanes founded a free public lecture series to be given by leading intellectuals. Romanes invited Huxley to give the second lecture, following William Ewart Gladstone, and Huxley chose evolution and ethics as his topic. Huxley maintained that he did not think the doctrine of evolution could give us an ethics to live by. Even if one accepts that evolution has produced creatures such as ourselves with a moral sense, it does not follow that we can look to evolution to define the content of what we call moral:

The propounders of what are called the “ethics of evolution,” when the “evolution of ethics” would usually better express the object of their speculations, adduce a number of more or less interesting facts and more or less sound arguments in favor of the origin of the moral sentiments, . . . by a process of evolution. . . . But as the immoral sentiments have no less been evolved, there is, so far, as much natural sanction for the one as the other. The thief and the murderer follow nature just as much as the philanthropist. Cosmic evolution may teach us how the good and the evil tendencies of man may have come about; but, in itself, it is incompetent to furnish any better reason why what we call good is preferable to what we call evil than we had before. (*Collected Essays*, 9.47)

This seemingly devastating critique of evolutionary ethics, however, must be situated in its historical context if we are to understand fully why Huxley wrote what he did. Examining Huxley’s entire corpus of work demonstrates that his view of nature was not as harsh at it appears.

Huxley was optimistic about the insights that evolution could provide for human society. In the 1860s, he believed that the key to playing the game of life successfully was learning the rules of the game and that those rules were the laws of nature. The game of life was infinitely more difficult and complicated than chess, and the other player was hidden from us, although her play was always “fair, just, and patient.” To learn the rules one had to turn to the teacher, who was Nature herself. People’s directing their affections and wills “into an earnest and loving desire to move in harmony with [Nature’s] laws” would lead to a just and fair society (*Collected Essays*, 3.82–83).

By the time of the Romanes lecture, however, Huxley's views had changed considerably. Herbert Spencer had articulated the advantages of applying evolutionary theory to social behavior, espousing an ethic that became known as social Darwinism. Spencer coined the phrase "survival of the fittest," which Darwin later adopted to describe the ongoing struggle for existence that had resulted in natural selection. Spencer and his followers argued that one's moral obligations should be to promote this struggle for existence in the social realm. Therefore Spencer was against any sort of safety net such as the poor laws, for they only contributed to the survival of the least fit. Such policies might lessen inequalities, but it also rewarded and promoted the survival of the unfit, which would result in the deterioration of society. Here was a social program, an ethic, that claimed to ground its validity in Darwin's theory.

Needless to say, many people could not abide an ethic that was counter to all common decency, one that claimed the state had no obligation to the less fortunate members of society. Huxley responded to the harsh extreme individualism of Spencer in his Romanes lecture, claiming that "laws and moral precepts are directed to the end of curbing the cosmic process and reminding the individual of his duty to the community. . . . Let us understand, once and for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it" (*Collected Essays*, 9.49). Huxley, like many later critics such as G. E. Moore, attacked evolutionary ethics on the grounds of committing the naturalistic fallacy. Just because nature *is* a certain way does not mean nature *ought* to be that way. However, Huxley's critique actually goes far deeper than this.

Implicit in the various versions of evolutionary ethics was the idea that nature was progressive. Huxley denied this. In earlier writings, he had argued that one of the great strengths of Darwin's theory was that in addition to explaining how organisms change and progress, it also explained how many organisms do not progress, and some even become simpler (SM, 2.91). Therefore we cannot assume that applying the principles of evolution to the social realm would result in the progress and improvement of society. Huxley realized that *fittest* had a connotation of *best*, but as he correctly pointed out, if the environment suddenly became much cooler, the survival of the fittest would most likely bring about in the plant world a population of more and more stunted and humbler organisms. In such an environment, the lichen and diatoms might be the most fit. Furthermore, the strict definition of Darwinian fitness is reproductive success. However, surely no one would label a mad rapist who successfully impregnated hundreds of women the "best" or "most fit" member of society.

The key to reproductive success is adaptation. Adaptation is at the core of Darwin's theory, as the mechanism of natural selection explains not just how organisms change, but how they change adaptively. This idea of adaptation has been evolutionary theory's greatest strength and also its greatest weakness, because we can tell an endless number of adaptive stories. Which one do

we believe? Particularly in explaining human evolution, cultural biases have strongly influenced the types of stories that have been told. Huxley was responding to a particular story being told at the time. Critics on both sides misconstrued Huxley's lecture. Freethinkers accused him of abandoning them, while conservatives welcomed him as a convert to orthodoxy. Neither was right. Huxley had regarded the lecture as an "egg dance" because Romanes had specified that the lecture could not be on either theology or politics. Much had to be left unsaid. To clarify his views, the following year Huxley wrote the *Prolegomena*, prefacing the reissue of the lecture.

Controversial in Huxley's time, evolutionary ethics remains a hotly debated topic today. Today, the possibility of building an ethics rooted in biology seems more promising in light of a variety of different kinds of research (Damasio; Waal; Ramachandran). It suggests a way out of the abyss of the dark side of human nature, validating Huxley's earlier views that learning and abiding by nature's rules would result in a just and fair society. However, not only must nature be interpreted, but every human act results from a complex interaction of nature and culture. Although a vast literature has accumulated since Huxley wrote *Evolution and Ethics* (in Volume 9 in *Collected Essays*), he provided us with one of the clearest articulations of the problem of evolutionary ethics. In that regard Huxley's fundamental message in *Evolution and Ethics* is not historically contingent. It is an eloquent and compelling reminder that great caution must be exercised in evaluating any ethical system.

Huxley's work remains highly relevant in many other fields as well. The question of saltation continued to be revisited and found its most serious hearing under the guise of punctuated equilibrium formulated by Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge. Today, the fossil record documents a pattern of both gradual change, as Darwin claimed, and the fits and spurts that Huxley commented on. Explaining these different patterns in the fossil record has been a highly productive line of research. Throughout the twentieth century some paleontologists disputed Huxley's claim of the close relationship between birds and dinosaurs. But evidence continued to accumulate in favor of Huxley's idea, and with the recent discovery of the feathered dinosaurs, as well as many other finds, it is now overwhelmingly accepted that birds evolved from dinosaurs (Norell and Clark). Today one of the most exciting areas of research is evolutionary developmental biology, which is attempting to integrate the findings from development with research in evolution. It is addressing the question that most interested Huxley: How does form come to be?

Huxley's defense of evolution is still timely. Creation science and now intelligent design are purportedly attacking Darwin's theory on scientific grounds, but as in Huxley's time, the scientific objections are theologically based. Huxley recognized that these kinds of objections could not be dealt with just by appealing to the "facts." Nevertheless, he also emphasized the importance of evidence in all his work. What counted as evidence was informed by his philosophy, particularly his articulation of what he meant by *agnostic*. But it

could also be argued that his experience as a scientist provided the framework for his philosophy. Science was the path to knowledge. As he stated time and time again, this was his goal in life—to understand the natural world better.

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Robert G. Ingersoll

Tom Flynn

In the course of a thirty-year speaking career, Robert Green Ingersoll—"the Great Agnostic"—was seen and heard by more Americans than any human being prior to the advent of motion pictures and radio. The best-known critic of religion in American history, he was regarded as the nation's foremost public speaker in a day when oratory was a principal medium of information and entertainment. Today Ingersoll is largely forgotten, partly because of antipathy among the religious, partly because he created no organization to perpetuate his influence, and partly because of inconsistencies in his principal arguments—yet also because much that he advocated entered consensus opinion and ceased to be controversial.

BIOGRAPHY

Ingersoll was born on August 11, 1833, the third and youngest child of John and Mary Livingston Ingersoll. John Ingersoll was a Presbyterian minister and an early abolitionist; Mary prepared and circulated a petition urging Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, allegedly the first such petition prepared by a woman in the United States (Kittredge, 13–14).

Robert's middle name celebrates another abolitionist minister, Beriah Green (1795–1874). In 1832 Green won national attention with abolitionist sermons delivered at an Ohio college. Green was a correspondent and friend of John Ingersoll's; they probably visited when Green traveled east to become president of a radical abolitionist college near Utica, New York, one month before Robert's birth.

John Ingersoll's precocious abolitionism often alienated even northern congregations; the family moved regularly. Mary Ingersoll died at Cazenovia,

New York, on December 2, 1835. John and the children continued west. During Robert's adolescence the family resided west of Milwaukee. There Robert encountered one of his principal literary influences, the Scots poet Robert Burns (1759–1796). He already had made another literary acquaintance, William Shakespeare. Shakespeare's grandeur and Burns's swagger would deeply influence Ingersoll's later style.

About this time Robert broke with his father's Christianity. Hearing tent revival sermons on the torments of the damned, he judged the concept of eternal punishment repugnant. "For the first time I understood the dogma of eternal pain," he would later recount. "For the first time my imagination grasped the height and depth of the Christian horror. Then I said: 'It is a lie, and I hate your religion'" (Farrell, 4.17).

Though Ingersoll's formal education was spotty, he read insatiably and apparently had the gift of eidetic memory. At age twenty-six he entered law in partnership with his older brother Ebon; the two eventually moved to Peoria, Illinois, where both were politically active and Robert gained local renown as a speaker. Robert's courtroom performances intrigued the freethinking judge Benjamin W. Parker, who had discerned Ingersoll's dissatisfaction with orthodox religion. Ingersoll wooed and won Judge Parker's irreligious daughter, Eva Amelia Parker. The couple wed in 1862. This was also the year in which the Reverend John Ingersoll died. During his final illness, he confided to Robert that he, too, had given up the belief in eternal punishment, though he remained a believer in God (Larson, 45).

With the outbreak of the Civil War, Robert Ingersoll raised a cavalry regiment, earning the automatic rank of colonel. He would answer to "Colonel Ingersoll" ever after. Ingersoll's regiment was overwhelmed in its first battle, he and most of his men being taken prisoner. As often happened early in the war, Ingersoll was paroled and released to home on condition that he fight no more. But if Ingersoll could not fight, he could deploy a more powerful weapon in the Union cause: his stirring voice. He attained regional prominence for speeches exhorting support for the war effort.

Ingersoll and his wife had two children: Eva, born September 22, 1863; and Maud, born November 4, 1864. Much to the discomfiture of religious opponents, the family enjoyed a harmonious home life untouched by rancor or scandal.

Ingersoll was increasingly in demand as an after-dinner speaker, a political speechmaker, and a lecturer on social and cultural topics. His wife and father-in-law persuaded him to add to his repertoire speeches critical of orthodox Christianity. These controversial lectures drew large audiences, and by 1869 he was a speaker at the national level. By all accounts, his oratorical gifts were exceptional. After hearing Ingersoll speak at a banquet, Mark Twain wrote to his wife, "What an organ is human speech when it is played by a master" (Larson, 235–236).

While Ingersoll's fame as an infidel lecturer grew, so did his stature as a Republican political speaker. (Recall that the Republicans were the party of Lincoln and zealous in the Union cause.) In 1876 Ingersoll addressed the Republican National Convention at Cincinnati, urging the nomination of Maine senator James G. Blaine. Ingersoll praised Blaine as a heroic "plumed knight," a label Blaine would carry throughout life. Though Blaine was not nominated (three-time Ohio governor Rutherford B. Hayes captured the nomination, going on to win the most contentious presidential election in U.S. history), Ingersoll's speech for Blaine was widely celebrated.

Ingersoll became perhaps the GOP's most influential campaigner. During his public life no Republican presidential candidate for whom Ingersoll campaigned failed to attain the White House. The only Republican candidate for whom Ingersoll declined to campaign (ironically, Blaine) was defeated.

Following the Civil War, Ingersoll pioneered a self-congratulatory style of rhetoric called "waving the bloody shirt." It vividly invoked the horrors of the Civil War in order to flog Democrats, who were portrayed as having tolerated Southern secession and defended slavery (some had).

At an 1876 speech attended by what the Chicago *Tribune* called "the greatest crowd ever assembled in Chicago," Ingersoll proclaimed, "The youngest man here . . . will never live long enough to see a Democratic President of the United States. No man can carry that aggregation of rascality, that aggregation of treasonable practices, that aggregation of Southern sympathizers . . . on his back and make a successful run for the presidency of the United States" (Burdick, 4.139).

One month before, addressing a throng of Union veterans in Indianapolis, Ingersoll cried, "Every man that loved slavery better than liberty was a Democrat. The man that assassinated Abraham Lincoln was a Democrat. . . . Every man that wanted the privilege of whipping another man to make him work for him for nothing and pay him with lashes on his naked back, was a Democrat" (Farrell, 9.158). On this occasion Ingersoll softened partisan bombast with a message of reconciliation rich in the sentiments that had carried a nation through the hideous carnage of war: "The past rises before me like a dream. Again we are in the great struggle for national life. We hear the sounds of preparation—the music of boisterous drums—the silver voices of heroic bugles. We see thousands of assemblages, and hear the appeals of orators. We see the pale cheeks of women, and the flushed faces of men; and in those assemblages we see all the dead whose dust we have covered with flowers" (Farrell, 9.167). The 768-word passage became known as "A Vision of War" and was repeatedly reprinted. It and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address were considered the foremost literary responses to the Civil War until Stephen Crane published *The Red Badge of Courage* in 1895.

Yet it was as an outspoken critic of religion that Ingersoll achieved his greatest fame. He packed the largest theaters of the day for lectures with titles

including “The Gods,” “Some Mistakes of Moses,” “Ghosts,” and “What We Must Do to Be Saved.” His income from antireligious speaking eclipsed even his earnings as one of America’s highest-profile lawyers.

In 1876, Ingersoll encountered a former Civil War general on a train. Asked whether there existed a God, a devil, and a heaven, Ingersoll replied each time, “I don’t know: do you?” He then improvised a two-hour recitation of the case against religion. Shaken by Ingersoll’s disbelief, the former general resolved to write a popular novel that would embody his Christian faith. He was Lew Wallace, and the novel was *Ben-Hur*, the number one best seller of the entire nineteenth century and the inspiration for epic films in 1925 and 1959.

Ingersoll’s legal work sometimes intersected with his agnostic activism. In 1887 he mounted a pro bono defense of Charles B. Reynolds, an itinerant freethought lecturer who conducted tent revivals up and down the east coast preaching his version of the “religion of humanity.” At Boonton, New Jersey, a hostile crowd drove Reynolds from his tent and ruined it. In short order he faced two counts of blasphemy—a crime under a law dating from the Revolutionary era—in connection with his preachings. After delays the trial took place at Morristown, New Jersey, amid great media attention. Ingersoll called no witnesses for the defense. Instead he delivered a passionate two-and-a-half-hour oration on intellectual liberty. The jury convicted Reynolds, but the judge imposed only a modest fine and costs, which Ingersoll paid (Larson, 214–217). His summation made so deep an impression that the notion of prosecution for blasphemy was effectively discredited. No successful blasphemy prosecution was ever again brought in the United States.

No friend of sex radicals, Ingersoll declared in one of his most-popular lectures, “I hold in utter contempt the opinions of those long-haired men and short-haired women who denounce the institution of marriage” (Farrell, 1.357). Twentieth-century evangelist Billy Sunday (1862–1935) would revive “long-haired men and short-haired women” as a popular label for cultural radicals, it being little recognized that the most prominent revival preacher of the day had borrowed this trademark figure of speech from the Great Agnostic.

Ingersoll carried his repertoire of lectures in memory and composed new lectures in his head. Most of his popular speeches had no authoritative written text. Now and again he would write out a lecture from memory for publication by his son-in-law, Clinton P. Farrell. More frequently, unauthorized versions were published by local businesspeople who hired stenographers to visit theaters and record Ingersoll’s words, a task performed with varying accuracy. Meanwhile, Ingersoll’s wife, Eva, filled a hundred scrapbooks with newspaper accounts of his speeches and interviews.

At Farrell's insistence, Ingersoll spent the last two summers of his life reviewing and correcting the newspaper accounts, then writing out the final versions in longhand. This task had been but lately completed when Ingersoll died.

Ingersoll died of heart disease on July 21, 1899, in Dobbs Ferry, New York, at the home of his daughter Eva and her husband. His cremated ashes were held at the Dobbs Ferry home until Mrs. Ingersoll died in 1923, after which the ashes of Robert Green and Eva Amelia Ingersoll were interred beneath a substantial monument at Arlington National Cemetery.

"Probably the death of no private citizen of this republic ever attracted so much attention as that of Colonel Ingersoll," reported freethought journalist E. M. MacDonald (161). Thousands attending a memorial gathering in Peoria contributed to erect a statue of Ingersoll that stands today. A similar gathering in Chicago was addressed by Clarence Darrow, another in Denver by the governor of Colorado.

Unsavory rumors began to circulate. One claimed that Ingersoll's infidel family had let his body rot until neighbors complained about the stench; another that Ingersoll had suicided. There were so many tales of deathbed conversion that Ingersoll's wife and other family members filed a series of affidavits between 1906 and 1920 denying that Ingersoll had embraced Christianity before death (Larson, 272–277; MacDonald, appendix).

Clint Farrell released a twelve-volume collected works in 1900. *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll* was published under the imprint of the Dresden Publishing Company, named for the village of Ingersoll's birth. The lectures whose authoritative texts Ingersoll had so recently compiled filled the first four volumes of the set. The other eight volumes, set in smaller type, were drawn from Mrs. Ingersoll's large clipping collection. Included were magazine articles; interviews; transcripts of after-dinner, memorial, and political speeches; and examples of Ingersoll's legal rhetoric. The collection became known as the Dresden Edition and went through numerous impressions. Printings after 1911 included an Ingersoll biography by Herman Kittredge as a thirteenth volume. The last sizable printing was struck in 1929.

INGERSOLL'S PRINCIPAL CONTENTIONS

Ingersoll, a frontier autodidact with modest formal education, was a popularizer, not a philosopher. His thought was unsystematic and occasionally inconsistent. Still, it is remarkable how often, and in how many areas, his thinking was ahead of its time—so much so that many of his passages read as though composed decades later than they were. Others, however, are thumpingly obvious products of their day.

When Ingersoll was growing up, popular religion was ubiquitous and burdensome. Many American Christians accepted predestination and human depravity; most believed in a literal hell. In a brief passage describing the

childhood of Thomas Paine (1737–1809), Ingersoll captured the atmosphere of his own early years: “Sabbaths used to be prisons. Every Sunday was a Bastille” (Farrell, 1.380).

With occasional exceptions, Ingersoll described his overall religious position as *agnostic*. Coined in 1869 by Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895), this word denoted the position that it was unknowable whether a deity or the supernatural existed. In his lecture “Why I Am an Agnostic,” Ingersoll posed a series of questions and answers: “Is there a God? I do not know. Is man immortal? I do not know. One thing I do know, and that is, that neither hope nor fear, belief, nor denial, can change the fact” (Farrell, 4.64). “There may be a God who will make us happy in another world,” Ingersoll told a Chicago newspaperman in 1879. “If he does, it will be more than he has accomplished in this” (Farrell, 8.19).

Given agnosticism, human beings must focus on making the best possible lives in this world: “It is of no importance to me whether God exists or not. I exist, and it is important to me to be happy while I exist. Therefore I had better turn my attention to finding out the secret of happiness, instead of trying to ascertain the secret of the universe” (Farrell, 8.209).

Despite his embrace of the agnostic label, Ingersoll saw no distinction between agnosticism and atheism: “There is no difference. The Agnostic is an Atheist. The Atheist is an Agnostic. The Agnostic says: ‘I do not know, but I do not believe there is any God.’ The Atheist says the same” (Farrell, 8.247).

“On the Gods,” perhaps Ingersoll’s most popular lecture, reviewed the evidence that gods were made in man’s image: “Each nation has created a god, and the god has always resembled his creators. He hated and loved what they hated and loved, and he was invariably found on the side of those in power . . . and detested all nations but his own” (Farrell, 1.7). Lest anyone miss the point, in the Dresden Edition this lecture was headed by a wry inversion of a famous aphorism by poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744): “An honest God is the noblest work of man” (Farrell, 1.7).

Ingersoll memorably lampooned the widely believed doctrine of the Trinity:

Jesus, according to the faith, is the second person in the Trinity, the Father being the first and the Holy Ghost the third. Each of these three persons is God. Christ is his own father and his own son. The Holy Ghost is neither father nor son, but both. The son was begotten by the father, but existed before he was begotten—just the same before as after. Christ is just as old as his father, and the father is just as young as his son. The Holy Ghost proceeded from the Father and Son, but was equal to the Father and Son before he proceeded, that is to say, before he existed, but he is of the same age of the other two. So, it is declared that the Father is God, and the Son God and the Holy Ghost God, and that these three Gods make one God. (Farrell, 4.266–267)

For modern-day readers, Ingersoll’s religious critiques may have a quaint, tilting-at-windmills quality; some would have been judged naive by religious scholars of his own day. But for the audience to which they were

addressed—ordinary Americans raised inside literalistic and repressive traditions—Ingersoll's critiques were bold, revelatory, often liberating. In part the reason was that Ingersoll read the Bible as his listeners did. Like Thomas Paine before him, Ingersoll "attacked the Bible as it is translated. If the translation is wrong, let its defenders correct it" (Farrell, 1.146).

Ingersoll thought the universe governed by rigid Newtonian mechanism: "Nature is but an endless series of efficient causes" (Farrell, 1.53). Given mechanism, matter is necessarily indestructible, time without end. If matter and force "can neither be increased nor diminished . . . it follows that nothing has been or can be created; that there never has been or can be a creator" (Farrell, 4.497–498). This argument entails difficulties, examined below.

Far from exhibiting design, nature is a purposeless cavalcade of cruelty. Surely no such universe could have a loving designer: "Can we find 'design' in the fact that every animal lives upon some other, that every drop of every sea is a battle-field where the strong devour the weak? Over the precipice of cruelty rolls a perpetual Niagara of blood" (Farrell, 5.47). On the other hand, if our pitiless cosmos is a god's work, then that god must be the greatest of monsters: "It seems to me impossible for a civilized man to love or worship, or respect the God of the Old Testament" (Farrell, 4.19).

Ingersoll on whether the world bears signs of divine design:

"Would an infinitely wise, good and powerful, God, intending to produce man, commence with the lowest possible forms of life; with the simplest organism that can be imagined, and during immeasurable periods of time, slowly and almost imperceptibly improve upon the rude beginning, until man was evolved? Would countless ages thus be wasted in the production of awkward forms, afterwards abandoned? Can the intelligence of man discover the least wisdom in covering the earth with crawling, creeping horrors, that live only upon the agonies and pangs of others? Can we see the propriety of so constructing the earth, that only an insignificant portion of its surface is capable of producing an intelligent man? Who can appreciate the mercy of so making the world that all animals devour animals; so that every mouth is a slaughterhouse, and every stomach a tomb? Is it possible to discover infinite intelligence and love in universal and eternal carnage?"

—Robert G. Ingersoll, "The Gods," in Farrell, 1.70–71

"Nature has no design, no intelligence. Nature produces without purpose, sustains without intention and destroys without thought. Man has a little intelligence, and he should use it. Intelligence is the only lever capable of raising mankind."

—Robert G. Ingersoll, "What Is Religion?" in Farrell, 4.503

There is nothing new in these observations. Their novelty lies only in their poetic cadence—and in the fact that hundreds of thousands of Americans paid lofty ticket prices to absorb Ingersoll's ideas for three and four hours at a stretch.

Like many liberal thinkers after Voltaire, Ingersoll associated religious orthodoxy with hidebound conservatism, infidelity with creativity and progress: "Every creed is a rock in running water: humanity sweeps by it" (Farrell, 1.153). "Day by day, religious conceptions grow less and less intense. . . . The ceremonies remain, but the ancient faith is fading out of the human heart" (Farrell, 1.85). Ingersoll invited his believing listeners to surrender to history's momentum and follow it toward agnosticism.

Ingersoll presented his view of the Bible in "On the Gods": "All that is necessary, as it seems to me, to convince any reasonable person that the Bible is simply and purely of human invention—of barbarian invention—is to read it. Read it as you would any other book; think of it as you would of any other; get the bandage of reverence from your eyes . . . and you will be amazed that you ever, for one moment, supposed a being of infinite wisdom, goodness and purity, to be the author of such ignorance and of such atrocity" (Farrell, 1.17).

Ingersoll reserved his most insistent criticism for the concept of hell: "The doctrine of eternal punishment is the most infamous of all doctrines—born of ignorance, cruelty and fear" (Farrell, 2.327). "The malice of God is infinite and the hunger of his revenge eternal" (Farrell, 4.20). Ingersoll found this doctrine infinitely repellent: "I would rather that we all should go to eternal chaos, to black and starless night, than that just one soul should suffer eternal agony" (Farrell, 1.524–525).

Fortunately, in the modern age religions that trade on the terror of hellfire cannot long survive: "Every creed in which is the dogma of eternal pain is doomed. Every church teaching the infinite lie must fall, and the sooner the better" (Farrell, 9.470).

To self-satisfied clerics Ingersoll had this to say: "The agnostic does not simply say, 'I do not know.' He goes another step, and he says, with great emphasis, that you do not know" (Farrell, 6.463). But he recognized that some clergy had come to the same conclusions he had regarding the orthodox creeds: "The clergy know that I know that they know that they do not know" (Farrell, 2.348). Doubtless some whose education had included philology, archaeology, and the German "higher criticism" felt trapped, terrified to shake the orthodoxy of their flocks by preaching what they had learned: "Every pulpit is a pillory, in which stands a hired culprit, defending the justice of his own imprisonment" (Farrell, 1.180).

Ingersoll challenged these clerics to speak out regardless of the risk:

My dear preachers, I beg you to tell the truth. Tell your congregations that Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch. Tell them that nobody knows who

wrote the five books. Tell them that Deuteronomy was not written until, about six hundred years before Christ. Tell them that nobody knows who wrote Joshua, or Judges, or Ruth, Samuel, Kings, or Chronicles, Job, or the Psalms, or the Song of Solomon. Be honest, tell the truth. Tell them that . . . Ezekiel and Daniel were insane. Tell them that nobody knows who wrote the gospels, and tell them that no line about Christ written by a contemporary has been found . . . and hold high the torch of Reason. (Farrell, 4.102–103)

Ingersoll was an early champion of Darwin and the theory of evolution. For him this theory demonstrated the foolishness and superfluity of belief in a creator god. He recognized that morality, too, is a product of evolution: “Among savages, the immediate consequences of actions are taken into consideration. As people advance, the remote consequences are perceived. The standard of conduct becomes higher. The imagination is cultivated. A man puts himself in the place of another. The sense of duty becomes stronger, more imperative. Man judges himself” (Farrell, 4.490). Ingersoll equated high morality with the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham: “The glory of Bentham is, that he gave the true basis of morals . . . ‘The greatest happiness of the greatest number’” (Farrell, 12.18).

Ingersoll never called for the extinction of religion in general. He spoke of replacing orthodox religions of supernaturalism—“the worship of something we know not of” (Farrell, 2.344)—with a “religion of usefulness” (Farrell, 4.109), a “great religion of reciprocity” (Farrell, 4.110). He called it the Religion of Humanity: “We are laying the foundations of the grand temple of the future—not the temple of all the gods, but of all the people—wherein, with appropriate rites, will be celebrated the religion of Humanity” (Farrell, 1.89). It was seldom clear what precisely Ingersoll expected this religion to consist of (more on this below).

CONTENTIONS REGARDING SUBJECTS OTHER THAN RELIGION

Though best known for his critiques of religion, Ingersoll lectured on a wide range of subjects, from the arts and politics to morality and philosophy. Many of these lectures touch at least obliquely on his religious views; most illustrate his progressive, even radical, views on social questions.

In the realm of politics, Ingersoll associated freedom and liberty of thought with the ideals of the American republic and the courage to question every orthodoxy: “We need free bodies and free minds,—free labor and free thought,—chainless hands and fetterless brains” (Farrell, 1.162).

The rights of all are absolutely equal. I have the same right to give you my opinion that you have to give me yours. I have no right to compel you to hear, if you do not want to. I have no right to compel you to speak if you do not want to. . . . Of more value than any religion, of more value than any government, of

more value than all the constitutions that man has written and all the laws that he has passed, is this liberty—the liberty of the human mind. (Farrell, 7.226–227)

Happiness was for Ingersoll the primary human value. Perhaps his best-known aphorism is “The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to try and make somebody else so” (Farrell, 7.259). He understood happiness in practical, secular terms: “Happiness, including its highest forms, is after all the only good, and everything, the result of which is to produce or secure happiness, is good, that is to say, moral” (Farrell, 11.542–543).

Ingersoll defied orthodox views of suicide in several interviews. His position, then audacious, seems today straightforward: “There are circumstances under which suicide is natural, sensible and right. When a man is of no use to himself, when he can be of no use to others, when his life is filled with agony, when the future has no promise of relief, then I think he has the right to cast the burden of life away and seek the repose of death” (Farrell, 7.419). What of the orthodox contention that our lives belong to God and are not ours to dispose of? “If God wants a man to stay here he ought to make it more comfortable for him” (Farrell, 8.582).

Far from merely opposing slavery, Ingersoll practiced a racial egalitarianism decades ahead of its time: “Virtue is of no color; kindness, justice and love, of no complexion” (Farrell, 2.410). He was fierce in condemning racism: “I pity the man, I execrate and hate the man who has only to boast that he is white” (Farrell, 2.420). Yet he was also able to soften the issue with wit: “It is very easy to see why colored people should hate us, but why we should hate them is beyond my comprehension” (Farrell, 11.51).

Though harshly critical of the Victorian sex radicals whom some freethinkers championed (see below), Ingersoll defended divorce, birth control, and woman suffrage—the first two in language seldom heard except from the sex radicals he despised: “Most of the laws about divorce are absurd or cruel, and ought to be repealed” (Farrell, 8.577). “Science must make woman the owner, the mistress of herself. Science . . . must put it in the power of woman to decide for herself whether she will or will not become a mother” (Farrell, 4.505). These ideas sometimes shaded into a eugenic advocacy common at the time: “The real question is, can we prevent the ignorant, the poor, the vicious, from filling the world with their children? Can we prevent this Missouri of ignorance and vice from emptying into the Mississippi of civilization? . . . I look forward to the time when men and women . . . will refuse to fill the world with failures” (Farrell, 4.503–504, 506).

INCONSISTENCIES IN INGERSOLL’S THOUGHT

Ingersoll neither originated most of his forward-looking ideas nor always espoused them consistently. In particular, his emancipatory ideas regarding

women coexisted with deeply conservative ideas about marriage and the family. What modern-day religious-right activist would not applaud him for declaring, "The marriage of the one man to the one woman is the citadel and fortress of civilization" (Farrell, 2.252)? This dichotomy would color Ingersoll's relations with the freethought organizations of his time and contribute to his failure to establish any institution to carry forward his legacy.

Conspicuous among freethought leaders was D. M. Bennett (1818–1882), founder and editor of the leading movement paper, *The Truth Seeker*. Bennett ruthlessly criticized Anthony Comstock (1834–1915), the decency crusader to whom the U.S. Congress granted sweeping police powers in 1873. Comstock repeatedly had Bennett arrested for distributing "obscene" materials, from sex-radical tracts to explicit texts on animal husbandry. After the first such arrest, despite his differences with Bennett, Ingersoll successfully advocated for the charges to be dropped. After the second arrest, Ingersoll entreated President Rutherford B. Hayes without result. The third, in 1879, led to a high-profile trial and Bennett's imprisonment. Bennett's defense attorney, Thaddeus Burr Wakeman (1834–1913), was also president of the National Liberal League, the nation's principal freethought organization. Ingersoll was a vice president of the league.

At a tempestuous league meeting in Chicago in September 1880, Wakeman proposed that the organization seek the unconditional repeal of the obscenity laws that underlay Comstock's powers. Ingersoll feared this repeal campaign would commit the league to favoring opening the mails to obscene materials. He lobbied for less expansive alternate proposals, actually speaking in favor of destroying obscene works: "There is not a man here who is not in favor, when these books and pictures come into the control of the United States, of burning them up when they are manifestly obscene" (Farrell, 12.226). When Wakeman's proposal was accepted by a majority of league members, Ingersoll resigned from the organization (Farrell, 12.215–230; Larson, 144–153).

Ingersoll shared with many liberals of his day a tendency toward scientism, the belief that science alone renders true judgments about the world and should be elevated above other disciplines. In an oft-quoted passage, he called science "the only possible savior of mankind" (Farrell, 5.505). Elsewhere he declared:

We know that science has given us all we have of value. Science is the only civilizer. It has freed the slave, clothed the naked, fed the hungry, lengthened life, given us homes and hearths . . . and it has destroyed the monsters, the phantoms, the winged horrors that filled the savage brain.

Science is the real redeemer. . . . It will put thoughtful doubt above thoughtless faith. It will give us philosophers, thinkers and savants, instead of priests, theologians and saints. It will abolish poverty and crime, and greater, grander, nobler than all else, it will make the whole world free. (Farrell, 4.349)

As noted, Ingersoll's mechanistic determinism convinced him that the cosmos had neither beginning nor end, and hence no creator. Ingersoll's idiosyncratic

philosophy of science was rooted in European radical materialism. In terms of twenty-first-century science, it was just wildly wrong.

In Ingersoll's time many scientists postulated that the universe *was* eternal. Critics of orthodox religion made much of this view. An eternal cosmos contradicted the Genesis narrative; also, mechanism made it easier to conceive of an order of the heavens that required no designer. Ingersoll went a step further with his contention that cosmic eternity positively refuted God's existence:

The idea of a creative deity is gradually being abandoned, and nearly all truly scientific minds admit that matter must have existed from eternity. It is indestructible, and the indestructible cannot be created. It is the crowning glory of our century to have demonstrated the indestructibility and the eternal persistence of force. Neither matter nor force can be increased nor diminished. Force cannot exist apart from matter. Matter exists only in connection with force, and consequently, a force apart from matter, and superior to nature, is a demonstrated impossibility. (Farrell, 1.46)

What was the source of this notion? Ingersoll (Farrell, 4.55) credited Friedrich Karl Christian Ludwig Büchner (1824–1899), a physician and philosopher, and founder of Germany's freethought movement. Büchner carried forward the drastic materialism of French philosopher Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–1751). While a lecturer in medicine at the University of Tübingen, Büchner published a sensational philosophical work, *Kraft und Stoff* (Force and Matter, 1855), whose argument for the indestructibility of matter and force Ingersoll drew upon. Büchner sought to counter both Hegelian idealism, with its personification of abstract concepts, and mystical Christian views of the cosmos.

Büchner's thought led Ingersoll in odd directions: "It has been demonstrated that the earth would fall to the sun, only for the fact, that it is attracted by other worlds, and those worlds must be attracted by other worlds still beyond them, and so on, without end. This proves the material universe to be infinite. If an infinite universe has been made out of an infinite god, how much of the god is left?" (Farrell, 1.46).

By any standard, *religion* is difficult to define. Twentieth-century scholar Winston L. King called it "the attempt to order individual and social life in terms of culturally perceived ultimate priorities"(285). Geddes MacGregor somehow completed his 1989 *Dictionary of Religion and Philosophy* without defining the word *religion* at all. Ingersoll was more obscure than any of them. Amazingly, this famed critic of religion managed in three decades of public life never to offer a coherent definition.

What should one make of this passage from an 1892 after-dinner speech?

What is religion? I say, religion is all here in this world—right here—and that all our duties are right here to our fellow-men; that the man that builds a home; marries the girl that he loves; takes good care of her; likes the family; stays home

nights, as a general thing; pays his debts; tries to find out what he can; gets all the ideas and beautiful things that his mind will hold; . . . he is what I call a religious man. . . . This is all the religion that I have; to make somebody else happier if I can. (Farrell, 12.157–158)

Here Ingersoll conflates religion with the liberal ideal of the well-rounded individual, tempered by a conservative notion of family values.

In other contexts religion appears equivalent to an ethical outlook, rather like the British term *life stance* or Paul Kurtz's coinage "eupraxsophy," encompassing both naturalism and supernaturalism. "What I contend is that Infidelity is a positive religion; that Christianity is a negative religion," Ingersoll declared, construing *religion* broadly enough to include both infidelity and Christianity. Yet just sentences later, Ingersoll observed, "Religion asks man to give up this world for one he knows nothing about." Here *religion* means Christianity only or, at most, supernatural religions generally. What of Ingersoll's own Religion of Humanity? Wait, the meaning shifts again: "I stand by the religion of reason" (Farrell, 11.495). Contrast that quotation with an aphorism from his celebrated lecture "Thomas Paine": "Infidelity is liberty; all religion is slavery" (Farrell, 1.159).

"The sword of the church was unsheathed, and the world was at the mercy of ignorant and infuriated priests, whose eyes feasted upon the agonies they inflicted. Acting, as they believed, or pretended to believe, under the command of God; stimulated by the hope of infinite reward in another world—hating heretics with every drop of their bestial blood; savage beyond description; merciless beyond conception,—these infamous priests, in a kind of frenzied joy, leaped upon the helpless victims of their rage. They crushed their bones in iron boots; tore their quivering flesh with iron hooks and pincers; cut off their lips and eye-lids; pulled out their nails, and into the bleeding quick thrust needles; tore out their tongues; extinguished their eyes; stretched them upon racks; flayed them alive; crucified them with their heads downward; exposed them to wild beasts; burned them at the stake; mocked their cries and groans; ravished their wives; robbed their children, and then prayed God to finish the holy work in hell."

—Robert G. Ingersoll, "Heretics and Heresies," in Farrell, 1.214–215.

Ingersoll delivered eloquent graveside orations for Walt Whitman, liberal divine Henry Ward Beecher, and many others. In these predictably sentimental speeches, he honestly confronted the atheist's conception of death as final oblivion, once calling it "the tongueless silence of the dreamless dust" (Farrell, 1.371). Yet he never embraced that view, preferring an almost painfully

agnostic position: “We do not know whether the grave is the end of this life, or the door of another, or whether the night here is not somewhere else a dawn” (Farrell, 12.399). In his 1879 funeral oration for his elder brother Ebon, he gave this view its most poetic expression: “Life is a narrow vale between the cold and barren peaks of two eternities. We strive in vain to look beyond the heights. . . . From the voiceless lips of the unreplying dead there comes no word; but in the night of death hope sees a star and listening love can hear the rustle of a wing” (Farrell, 12.390–391).

In an 1890 after-dinner speech, Ingersoll offered an eccentric psychological account: We might *effectively* live forever because we fail to register the end. “The last thing that you will know is that you are alive, and the last thing that will happen to you is the curtain, not falling, but the curtain rising on another thought, so that as far as your consciousness is concerned you will and must live forever. No man can remember when he commenced, and no man can remember when he ends” (Farrell, 12.114).

RESPONSES TO CRITICISM

Orthodox critics often charged that Ingersoll tore down conventional views, offering nothing in their place. In fact, Ingersoll’s critiques were richly rooted in secular values. Still, the epigraph opening the first published version of his lecture “The Mistakes of Moses” quipped, “A destroyer of weeds, thistles and thorns is a benefactor, whether he soweth grain or not.” More floridly, in his lecture “Thomas Paine” he demanded, “Is it a small thing to quench the flames of hell with the holy tears of pity—to unbind the martyr from the stake—break all the chains—put out the fires of civil war—stay the sword of the fanatic, and tear the bloody hands of the Church from the white throat of Science?” (Farrell, 1.161).

The felicity of Ingersoll’s household was so well known that most despaired of claiming that infidelity had stained his character. Still, some opponents suggested that growing up agnostic had damaged his children. With mordant wit, Ingersoll disposed of one of these accusations: “Another religious gentleman put in print the charge that my son, having been raised in the atmosphere of Infidelity, had become insane and died in an asylum. Notwithstanding the fact that I never had a son, the story . . . is repeated day after day” (Farrell, 11.394).

INGERSOLL’S IMPACT

Ingersoll was the most conspicuous among the speakers, writers, and activists who stirred America and Britain in the Golden Age of Freethought (1865–1910). One measure of these campaigners’ impact is a statement by an official of the U.S. Census that in 1893, atheists constituted 8 percent of the U. S.

population (Dierenfield, 27). If true, that percentage exceeds the fraction of the population self-identifying as atheists *or* agnostics in major opinion polls today!

The so-called Dresden Edition of Ingersoll's collected works went through multiple editions between 1900 and 1929. It is available in plain text at the Internet Infidels website, infidels.org. An elegantly searchable CD-ROM containing page scans of the Dresden Edition and an impressive corpus of other works are available from the independent publisher Bank of Wisdom.

Ingersoll is the subject of five biographies published between 1911 and 1990, as well as several anthologies and scholarly monographs.

As previously discussed, Ingersoll established no organization to perpetuate his ideas. In part this fact reflects his profound individualism—"We want no leaders—no followers" (Farrell, 4.348)—and in part it demonstrates the degree to which his conservative ideas on marriage, the family, and certain political issues intermittently estranged him from contemporary freethought organizations.

For these reasons and because of calculated marginalization by religiously conservative forces since the turn of the twentieth century, Ingersoll has been gradually erased from mainstream American history. As he himself noted, "Nothing so outrages the feelings of the church as a moral unbeliever—nothing so horrible as a charitable Atheist" (Farrell, 1.137). Even so, Ingersoll continues to be remembered and admired among nonreligious Americans.

An impressive grave marker greets visitors to Ingersoll's resting place, Site 1620 at Arlington Memorial Cemetery. (Ask at the visitors' center for a map showing the exact location.)

Ingersoll's Dresden, New York, birthplace was thrice restored as a memorial, in 1921, in 1954, and most recently in 1993. The Council for Secular Humanism has operated a seasonal museum at the site each summer and fall since 1993.

Peoria's Glen Oak Park boasts a full-length Ingersoll sculpture by sculptor Fritz Treibel, mounted on a stone plinth. It was dedicated on October 28, 1911, with Ingersoll's widow and other family members in attendance.

Ingersoll's principal New York City residence was razed and replaced by the Gramercy Park Hotel, which opened in 1925. Two memorial plaques identified it as the site of an Ingersoll residence, the second (1988) replacing one defaced by vandals. When Studio 54 mogul Ian Schrager conducted his 2006 renovation of the hotel, historical plaques had no place. New York freethought activists reclaimed the plaque and gifted it to the Ingersoll Birthplace Museum, where it was placed on display in 2008.

When twenty-first-century observers encounter Robert Green Ingersoll's soaring prose, they may wonder how such a voice could ever have been forgotten. Ingersoll's near-eviction from history underscores the danger of achieving fame without establishing a solid institution to carry forward one's message. Our time still awaits a lyrical visionary able to express the

freethinkers' dream of living without religion, someone who can movingly implore, "Let the ghosts go. We will worship them no more. Let them cover their eyeless sockets with their fleshless hands and fade forever from the imaginations of men" (Farrell, 1.326).

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Paul Kurtz

Bill Cooke

Paul Kurtz was born into a family with relatively recent memories of Russia and with a great enthusiasm for American society and what it could offer those who worked hard. Martin Kurtz, a businessman, and his wife, Anna, lived in Newark, New Jersey, when their son Paul was born on December 21, 1925. The value of education was well understood, and Paul was destined for a university education. But soon after enrolling at Washington Square College of New York University and not quite nineteen, he volunteered for military service. His unit was rushed to the front during the height of the Battle of the Bulge. A few months later he was among the forces that liberated Dachau concentration camp. He stayed with the American forces in Germany for eighteen months after the war before being demobilized.

Once again a civilian, Kurtz resumed his studies at New York University before moving on to Columbia University, where he took his PhD in 1952. At NYU he was a student of Sidney Hook and retained a lifelong relationship with the older philosopher. And through Hook, Kurtz stands in a direct line from John Dewey. It is not overstating things to say that Kurtz's work cannot be understood without an appreciation of how comprehensive the influence of Dewey and Hook has been. Like Hook, Kurtz has always been keen to distance humanism from dogmatic interpretations and unsavory allies. And like Dewey, Kurtz has wanted to emphasize the positive elements of nonreligious living. At the same time, he has also been more willing to criticize religion than either of his predecessors. Originally he was willing to use religious language to articulate humanist concepts and values, but after the 1970s he turned against this approach. In the tradition of Dewey and Hook, Kurtz has devoted his career to outlining a naturalistic and optimistic philosophy of life. But it was Kurtz's fate to be prominent at a time of resurgent fundamentalism, on the one hand, and postmodernism, on the other, which required a whole

new approach to problems his predecessors thought had been dealt with long before.

Kurtz's doctoral dissertation was called "The Problem of Value Theory." His academic career was devoted to justifying the methods of objective inquiry, although he was also very interested in the history of American philosophy. This interest was reflected in his contribution to the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that Paul Edwards edited in the 1960s, and that has long been regarded as uniquely authoritative. As well as entries on Cadwallader Colden (1688–1776) and Elihu Palmer (1764–1806), Kurtz was entrusted with the important article on "American Philosophy." He developed this interest by editing two extensive anthologies of American philosophy. He also continued to work in value theory and decision theory, his principal contribution being *Decision and the Condition of Man*.

But Kurtz was as much a public intellectual as he was a cloistered academic. In the manner of Dewey and Hook, Kurtz was actively involved in political and social issues of the day. So when, in 1967, he was offered the editorship of *The Humanist*, the magazine of the American Humanist Association (AHA), he took it. On assuming the editorship, Kurtz gave every impression of being a young man in a hurry. Shortly after taking the editorship, he wrote:

A person who leaves the traditional church in revolt does not want a warmed over dish of platitudes as a weak substitute, as he has been often served by organized humanism in the United States. If one reads what many professional humanists write about, one often finds the same old clichés and slogans. Humanism should be concerned with moral choice and social change, and not just theorize about them. ("The Moral Crisis in Humanism," 151)

While still a young man, taking Sidney Hook's Philosophy of Democracy course at New York University, Kurtz read everything his teacher wrote, so that when Hook posed Socratic questions to his class, Kurtz could give him the answer he wanted. To Kurtz's surprise, Hook found this annoying, preferring independent thought to received formulae, even his own. Once Kurtz understood this, he also understood the prime value of free inquiry. The two men remained friends until Hook's death forty years later.

KURTZ'S ORGANIZATIONS

Dewey and Hook lived their public lives through various organizations and committees. Kurtz carried this tradition on, but with the important addition of having a real facility in building sustainable organizations, a rare phenomenon

among philosophers. The important caveat is that, in the end, the organizations needed to be his creations. He worked for many years in the AHA and the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), among others. But in the end Kurtz has been at his best when he can fashion an organization in his own image. Among the organizations he founded or cofounded are CSICOP, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (1976); the Council for Secular Humanism (1980); the International Academy of Humanism (1983); the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (1983); Secular Organizations for Sobriety (1988); African-Americans for Humanism (1989); the Center for Inquiry (1991); the Society of Humanist Philosophers (1997); and the Commission for Scientific Medicine and Mental Health (2003).

Since 1991, Kurtz's flagship has been the Center for Inquiry (CFI), which works as an umbrella for all the other organizations. The CFI aims at being the premier humanist think tank for the world, combining skeptical inquiries into paranormal phenomena, undertaken by CSICOP, and articulation of the humanist outlook by the Council of Secular Humanism, as well as the work of the smaller organizations.

The stated goal of the CFI is "to promote and defend science, reason, and free inquiry in all aspects of human endeavor." It sees its purpose as contributing to the public understanding of science and reason, with particular reference to their applications to human conduct, ethics, and society. The principal CFI is located in Amherst, New York, adjacent to the State University of New York at Buffalo, and is known as the Center for Inquiry-Transnational. The Amherst Center is a complex of buildings that includes the largest library of skeptical, humanist, and rationalist material in the world, along with seminar, conference, and media facilities. Substantial CFI offices exist in New York City, Los Angeles, and St. Petersburg, Florida, with branch offices in Russia, Germany, France, Nigeria, India, Peru, Poland, Egypt, Spain, Uganda, and Nepal.

Kurtz's other main creation is Prometheus Books, which he began in 1969. Earlier freethought leaders had established publishing operations, but with the exception of Watts & Co. in Britain, none lasted for long. Kurtz understood what his predecessors did not, that a publishing house could not survive if it confined all its publishing activity to freethought alone. Certainly, humanism around the world would be immeasurably poorer had Prometheus not been around.

The extent of this achievement is remarkable. Few other significant humanists have made such significant and lasting contributions. The only two who invite comparison would be Charles Albert Watts and the Venerable Master Xingyun. Watts founded Watts & Co. publishers, the Rationalist Press Association, and its journal, now called the *New Humanist* in Britain. And Xingyun is the founder of the worldwide Buddhist organization Foguangshan, which teaches what it calls humanistic Buddhism.

KURTZ'S WRITINGS

Paul Kurtz is certainly one of the most prolific humanist authors of the last hundred years, being matched only by Isaac Asimov, Bertrand Russell, and Joseph McCabe. The published bibliography of his writings between 1952 and 2003 runs to seventy-nine pages. For our purposes we can distinguish four main categories of work: the academic books and collections of essays; his shorter, more popular works; the edited collections of essays; and finally, his articles.

Among the academic works of humanist philosophy one would count *Decision and the Condition of Man* in 1965; *The Fullness of Life*; *The Transcendental Temptation*; *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism*; *Eupraxophy: Living without Religion*; and *Skepticism: Inquiry and Reliable Knowledge* in 1992. The collections of his essays include *In Defense of Secular Humanism*; *Philosophical Essays in Pragmatic Naturalism* in 1990; *Embracing the Power of Humanism*; and *Skepticism and Humanism: The New Paradigm*.

His shorter, more popular works include *Exuberance*; *The Courage to Become* in 1996; *Affirmations* in 2004; and *What Is Secular Humanism?*. These works are the simplest introductions to Kurtz's humanism and spend relatively little time discussing religion. Similar in purpose to these shorter works are the three manifestos Kurtz wrote and guided to publication: *The Humanist Manifesto II*; *The Secular Humanist Declaration*; and *Humanist Manifesto 2000: A Call for a New Planetary Humanism*.

Kurtz has also edited or coedited several collections of essays on various topics. These include *Moral Problems in Contemporary Society*; *The Humanist Alternative*; *A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology* in 1985; *Building a World Community: Humanism in the Twenty-first Century* in 1989; *Challenges to the Enlightenment* in 1994; *Skeptical Odysseys* in 2001; *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* in 2003; and *Science and Ethics*.

Kurtz's academic books have had a mixed career, having been largely ignored by the academic community, in part because they were out of step when academic fashions moved to other questions. And though these are described as his "academic books," Kurtz hoped for a wider readership for them, an ambition often fatal to achieving scholarly acclaim. Ironically, these books have not enjoyed the influence he hoped they might among the general humanist readership, particularly outside the United States, where Kurtz's writing style has found less favor. They have fallen into the trap of being not academic enough for the specialists but too academic for the nonspecialists. The most successful of them was *Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism*, his main contribution to articulating a genuinely nonreligious ethics. This book has been translated into many languages.

In some ways, his shorter books have been the most successful. They have flown below the radar of the academics and have gone straight to the nonspecialist reader. With the exception of works by Hector Hawton and, more

recently, Richard Norman in the United Kingdom and Corliss Lamont in the United States, there had been a shortage of good outlines of humanism for the nonspecialist.

But in many ways the most useful of Kurtz's published works are the edited collections of essays on various topics. The essays, brought together in works from *Moral Problems in Contemporary Society*, published in the late 1960s, to *Science and Ethics*, published forty years later, are an impressive collection of the variety of opinions that can plausibly be called humanist.

KURTZ'S EXUBERANT HUMANISM

In the field of ideas, Kurtz's single greatest contribution has been as the articulator and defender of naturalistic humanism. As with anyone who has written extensively over a long period of time, one can see continuities and changes, but in most respects the core of his humanism has remained the same. What has changed every now and then has been his preferred packaging. He has always been aware of the dangers of an unduly dogmatic reading of humanism. "I am wary," he said at a conference in 1980, "of any *ism* (including *humanism*) that sets itself up as a doctrine or creed, seeks uniform agreement among its proponents, or attempts to legislate a moral code" (Storer, 11).

Perhaps the most important area where Kurtz has shifted course has been in his willingness to offer a substantive definition of humanism. Broadly, he has followed two contrasting approaches. On the one hand, he has been largely content to see humanism as a "general outlook, a method of inquiry, an ethic of freedom" (Storer, 13). But at other times he has been more of a mind to offer a definition:

Although humanists share many principles, there are two basic and minimal principles which especially seem to characterize humanism. First, there is a rejection of any supernatural conception of the universe and a denial that man has a privileged place within nature. Second, there is an affirmation that ethical values are human and have no meaning independent of human experience; thus humanism is an ethical philosophy in which man is central. (*Moral Problems in Contemporary Society*, 2)

This passage reflects the ambivalence in, on the one hand, acknowledging that humanity has no privileged place in nature while, on the other hand, appearing to place humanity back at center stage. In fact, there is no actual contradiction here because Kurtz is placing humanity at center stage only in the sense that Protagoras understood when he said humanity is the measure of all things. In the absence of any objective supernatural set of standards, we can do no more than operate according to our own lights, with all the flaws implied.

In the end, Kurtz has preferred not to define humanism in the sense of articulating a creed, preferring to speak instead of its characteristics: "Humanism

includes at least four main characteristics: (1) it is a method of inquiry; (2) it presents a cosmic world view; (3) it contains a concrete set of ethical recommendations for the individual's life stance; and (4) it expresses a number of social and political ideals" (*Eupraxophy*, 24). The main advantage of this approach is that it doesn't tie humanism down to any one set of beliefs. Confucian humanism will be at odds with Benthamite utilitarianism, just as American religious humanism will have relatively little in common with Indian materialism or British atheism. But what unites these and other humanist approaches is possession of a worldview and a range of ethical, political, and social views arrived at through consistent application of a skeptical, reasoning method of inquiry, complete with its willingness to keep an open mind, based in turn on an understanding of the limitations of our present knowledge. This open-ended definition of humanism emphasizes the ongoing, the dialogical, and the transcultural.

The strength of this approach is also its principal weakness. One is left uncertain as to what a humanist believes. We could replace "humanism" with "Islam," for instance, and, with due changes in the preferred method of inquiry, continue merrily on our way. So a process understanding such as Kurtz's is less a problem for those who already count themselves humanists, but for those inquiring from without, it can seem altogether too insubstantial.

This core dilemma has shown itself in Kurtz's writing, which has seesawed between criticizing some element of religious or paranormal behavior and articulating some aspect of the humanist worldview. The single most effective phrase in Kurtz's critical works is "transcendental temptation," a term that he used toward the end of his 1986 book by that title to refer to the temptation to look to the consolations of magic and religion rather than take responsibility for one's life and face reality (*Transcendental Temptation*, 449–461). The transcendental temptation is the clearest form of anthropocentric conceit we are prone to. Unfortunately, Kurtz has not developed this insightful phrase, the job being taken up by the Russian philosopher Valerii Kuvakin.

Kurtz sees humanism as what we can become if we dare to reject the transcendental temptation. Rejecting temptation takes courage and a mood of affirmation. Here Kurtz often retells the Prometheus story, where the Titan heroically stands up to Zeus's tyranny on behalf of humanity. Kurtz's short books (*Exuberance*, *The Courage to Become*, *Affirmations*, and *What Is Secular Humanism?*) all outline in various ways this picture of a life-affirming, exuberant humanism:

Human life has no meaning independent of itself. There is no cosmic force or deity to give it meaning or significance. There is no ultimate destiny for man. Such a belief is an illusion of humankind's infancy. The meaning of life is what we choose to give it. Meaning grows out of human purposes alone. (*Exuberance*, 174)

This passage, and the many others like it, has been ignored by the American fundamentalists, determined to prove, against all odds, that humanism is a

religion. But it has also been overlooked by those in the academic community who have contrived to see secular humanists as the opposite side of the coin from fundamentalists.

HUMANIST MANIFESTO II

The best way, in the space available, to follow Kurtz's evolving conceptions of humanism is to examine each of his public manifestos. It was in the spirit of engaged philosophy that Kurtz led the campaign in 1973 for a revised humanist manifesto. The original Humanist Manifesto was by this time four decades old and was in many respects unsatisfactory and obsolete. Over several issues of *The Humanist*, he ran features from leading thinkers on what the Humanist Manifesto had achieved forty years previously, and what aspects of it now needed reworking. Most people, including several of the signatories to the original, agreed that the manifesto needed updating.

The *Humanist Manifesto II* is a great improvement on the original. It is better prepared and marketed than its predecessor. Kurtz had gathered 114 signatories by the time of publication, and altogether 261 prominent thinkers from around the world put their names to it. It is also better thought out, being more specific about what humanism actually is and what it is not. And it canvasses a wider range of issues than its predecessor. And while the *Humanist Manifesto II* is a more consistently secular document, it is not antireligious in an unhelpful way. It acknowledges that religion can inspire dedication to commendable ethical ideals. And finally, the *Humanist Manifesto II* is careful not to set itself up as a rival creed: "These affirmations are not a final credo or dogma but an expression of a living and growing faith. We invite others in all lands to join us in further developing and working for these goals" (*Humanist Manifestos I and II*, 24).

While the *Humanist Manifesto II* makes plain its rejection of traditional monotheistic religion, it also distances itself from religious humanism:

Some humanists believe we should reinterpret traditional religions and reinvest them with meanings appropriate to the current situation. Such redefinitions, however, often perpetuate old dependencies and escapisms; they easily become obscurantist, impeding the free use of the intellect. We need, instead, radically new human purposes and goals. (*Humanist Manifestos I and II*, 16)

This unambiguous rejection of religious humanism went on to have important and unhelpful consequences for the unity of the humanist movement in the United States. Some religious humanists have accused *Humanist Manifesto II* of being too rigidly secular. Ironically, these criticisms coincided with American fundamentalists' accusing humanism of being "just another religion."

In recognition of the mixed record of the previous four decades, the *Humanist Manifesto II* is careful to avoid the facile optimism that is a feature of its predecessor. It speaks of Nazism, totalitarianism, and the harmful as well as the good products of science. Other contemporary evils listed include the abuse of power by military and industrial elites, racism, and sexism. So the second manifesto sets an altogether darker scene than its predecessor.

Against this backdrop, the *Humanist Manifesto II* makes eighteen main points, grouped into the fields of religion, ethics, the individual, democratic society, and humanity as a whole. The main points are

- Moral values derive from human experience;
- Reason and intelligence are humanity's most effective instruments;
- Economic systems should be judged by how they help humanity, rather than along ideological lines;
- The moral equality of all should be affirmed;
- The limits of national sovereignty should be transcended; and
- Planetary solutions should be adopted to planetary problems.

Without using the phrase, the *Humanist Manifesto II* is a call for planetary humanism. "What more daring a goal for humankind," the *Manifesto* concludes, "than for each person to become, in ideal as well as in practice, a citizen of a world community. It is a classical vision; we can now give it new vitality" (*Humanist Manifestos I and II*, 23).

Ever the public intellectual, Kurtz also saw to publication a collection of essays that was designed to complement the manifesto. The two previous attempts to put a book of this sort together had not been particularly successful. Julian Huxley's *Humanist Frame* in 1961 is too technical, even technocratic, while A. J. Ayer's *Humanist Outlook* of 1968 is too diffuse. The essays in *The Humanist Alternative* are shorter and snappier and convey more attractively what humanism actually meant to each contributor. While less transnational than would now be seen as adequate, *The Humanist Alternative* makes some effort to include humanists from outside the Anglo-American world. The Indian campaigner Gora got his first major international exposure in this book.

The overriding impression of this collection is of the variety of viewpoints of people who call themselves humanists. Kurtz addressed this issue in his essay, which he used as a conclusion to *The Humanist Alternative*. Under the title "Is Everyone a Humanist?" he welcomed the apparent trends toward openness in both the Catholic Church and the Marxist countries, both of which use the word *humanism*, though suitably prefixed by *Christian* and *Socialist*, respectively. But, he added, "we should surely insist that a theistic or totalitarian ideology cannot be considered humanistic in its essential nature if one of the most basic of human rights—the right of individuals to the free use of knowledge—is ignored" (*Humanist Alternative*, 185–186).

A SECULAR HUMANIST DECLARATION

The decade after the *Humanist Manifesto II* was a gloomy one for humanism. Inside the movement, relations between Kurtz and the AHA deteriorated until he left in 1977. And in society at large, religious fundamentalism, which had been simmering below the surface since the Scopes trial of 1925, burst into a new phase of angry assertiveness. It was against this background of growing irrationalism and paranoia in public discourse that Kurtz set about creating his own humanist organization, with its own distinctive brand of humanism. In 1980 he established the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (CODESH), “democratic” to distinguish it from Marxist humanism, and “secular” to distinguish it from the religious humanism preferred by the AHA. In 1996, once the danger of association with Marxism was over, CODESH became the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH). At the same time, Kurtz founded *Free Inquiry*, which quickly established itself as a leading humanist journal. And to help launch CODESH and *Free Inquiry*, Kurtz wrote *A Secular Humanist Declaration* to act as the flagship document of the movement.

Only seven years previously, the *Humanist Manifesto II* had been widely praised. Even the *New York Times* called it a philosophy for survival. But in seven short years the climate had changed considerably. In 1973 Kurtz could plausibly ask if everyone was a humanist, but in 1980 humanism looked, even to its friends, more like a battered relic of the past or, to its enemies, a vicious plot to undermine all that was best in America. Many sections of society were anxious about the growing fundamentalist threat, but few seemed able or willing to organize any coherent response. And many in the academic community were pleased to dismiss humanists as no more than the opposite side of the same coin as fundamentalists.

So, with a backdrop of his own estrangement from the AHA and the defeat of Jimmy Carter at the hands of a Republican Party on a sharp rightward trajectory, Kurtz felt the need for a new voice. The major change, of course, was adding *secular* to *humanism*. This coupling was relatively recent, going back only to 1958, but it was naming an increasingly identifiable humanist position, one that did not see value in simply repackaging a nonreligious life stance in the language of religion shorn only of supernaturalism. Kurtz was just as keen to articulate this nonreligious life stance, but he was no longer prepared to use religious language to make his point.

Kurtz was anxious that secular humanism not simply be a reaction to Christian fundamentalism and took care to identify threats posed by cults, the paranormal, and fanatical Islamic sects. But he was no less critical of authoritarian ideologies such as Marxism-Leninism and Nazism. He criticized the traditional leftist orientation of the humanist movement, arguing that conventional distinctions between “right” and “left” were rapidly becoming anachronistic. He called for a broad coalition of left and right, neoliberals, and social democrats to defend the free society.

In stark contrast to the line adopted by the fundamentalists, *A Secular Humanist Declaration* was specifically inclusive:

We are apprehensive that modern civilization is threatened by forces antithetical to reason, democracy, and freedom. Many religious believers will no doubt share with us a belief in many secular humanist and democratic values, and we welcome their joining with us in the defense of these ideals. (10)

The declaration goes on to itemize these ideals, which are of four main types:

Free inquiry, reason;

Ethics based on critical intelligence and education, including moral education;

A commitment to science and technology and the findings of science, such as evolution; and

Separation of church and state, the ideal of freedom, and religious skepticism.

Kurtz ended the declaration with this rallying cry:

We believe that it is possible to bring about a more humane world, one based upon the methods of reason and the principles of tolerance, compromise, and the negotiations of difference. We recognize the need for intellectual modesty and the willingness to revise beliefs in the light of criticism. Thus consensus is sometimes attainable. While emotions are important, we need not resort to the panaceas of salvation, to escape through illusion, or to some desperate leap toward passion and violence. We deplore the growth of intolerant sectarian creeds that foster hatred. In a world engulfed by obscurantism and irrationalism it is vital that the ideals of the secular city not be lost. (24)

The declaration got some worthwhile coverage on the front page of the *New York Times*, but the article's title, "Secular Humanists Attack a Rise in Fundamentalism," helped reinforce the perception of secular humanism's negative bent. In fact, the declaration is relatively inclusive and displays few of the faults its critics regularly accuse it of, being neither arrogant, nor speciesist, dogmatic, or hegemonic. It is certainly not unduly optimistic. It is, rather, a renewed call on behalf the traditional humanist values of toleration, free inquiry, and open-mindedness. But the gloomy picture painted in the introduction gives the rest of the declaration too strong a sense of being on the defensive. Many people, both allies and opponents of humanism, objected to religion's being exposed to criticism. To this objection Kurtz replied:

We share with many religionists their commitment to the values of a free society. But some dogmatic religionists are intolerant and wish to impose their views on others. Part of their growing influence may be attributed to the fact that the views they express often go unchallenged. Some skeptics ask, "Why take them seriously?" Others behave ostrich-like, hoping that they will go away. But doctrinaire religions must be taken seriously, for they have a powerful influence on

the lives of countless people. That is why we believe that religions should not be immune to free inquiry or critical scrutiny. ("On Criticizing Religion," 1)

This goal of scrutinizing religious claims has remained a central element of the secular humanist worldview. Secular humanists are often attacked for criticizing religion, the implication being that such behavior implies lack of respect. The paradox is that secular humanists show religions the courtesy of taking their truth claims seriously, and believing it to be worthwhile exposing those truth claims to scrutiny. The problem is that respect shown in this way seems to please neither the religious people being criticized nor humanist allies anxious not to criticize at all.

THE DEBATE OVER EUPRAXSOPHY

As *Free Inquiry* approached its tenth anniversary, Kurtz felt the need for a new direction. This restlessness has been a feature of his career, combining the entrepreneur's dissatisfaction with things as they are with the philosopher's temptation to coin new words. None of these new words have been particularly successful. Kurtz tried the term *igtheism* at one stage, to denote not outright rejection so much as our ignorance of what theologians really mean when they employ grand phrases like "ground of being" or "maker and ruler of the universe" (*New Skepticism*, 196–197). He has also been tempted on occasion to speak of *neohumanism*.

The most ambitious term Kurtz coined, and the one he persevered with the longest, was *eupraxsophy*. Certainly, the criticism of religion would continue, but, he announced, "Secular humanism must go beyond criticism and affirm a positive outlook" ("Free Inquiry's Second Decade," 64). It is important to recall that America's best-known atheist at the time was Madalyn Murray O'Hair, whose abusive antics served to confirm people's worst fears about nonbelievers. Secular humanism *is* atheistic, but Kurtz didn't want to limit it in that way. However, he was just as anxious not to make the AHA's mistake, as he saw it, of employing religious vocabulary while speaking of humanism. And this was more than quibbling over words, because the religious right was making a central point in its campaign the idea that teaching evolution in U.S. schools is unconstitutional by virtue of being a principal tenet of what they called the religion of secular humanism. Kurtz saw the need to forge a line between the Scylla of abusive atheism and the Charybdis of the "me-too" substitutionism of religious humanists.

It was partly to circumvent this dilemma that Kurtz developed the term *eupraxsophy*. He wanted to unite the unambiguous naturalism of the atheists with the social compassion of the religious humanists. And he wanted to do it while simplifying the message, by condensing the humanist ethic into one word—all without employing a religious vocabulary. It was a very ambitious plan.

"Humanists begin with the realization that the universe is a vast, impersonal system, impervious to their interests and needs, yet regard it as full of wonderful challenges and opportunities that enable them to create their own life-worlds."

—Paul Kurtz, "Secular Humanism and Eupraxophy,"
in Goicoechea et al., 319

With this goal in mind he wrote *Eupraxophy: Living without Religion* in 1989 to launch the word and returned to it at the end of *The New Skepticism* three years later.

Eupraxosophy owes an intellectual debt to Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia*, and yet it goes further in one crucial sense. Aristotle saw the final goal as the contemplative life, whereas eupraxosophy seeks a dynamic fusion of contemplation and action. The nub of the question, Kurtz wrote, is to love not just wisdom, but the *practice* of it. Here is where the debt to Dewey is a positive one, because eupraxosophy owes much to Dewey's slogan of intelligent action. Eupraxosophy is an amalgam of *eu* ("good, well"), *praxis* ("conduct, practice"), and *sophia* ("scientific and philosophic wisdom"). When the elements are brought together, *eupraxosophy* stands for "good wisdom and practice in conduct." The word was initially spelled *eupraxy*, but after some confusion about how the word should be pronounced, an *s* was added after the *x*. It is unlikely that this addition helped.

Eupraxosophy is a commendable idea, based on a perceptive reading of the divisions within the humanist movement. But it would be naive not to see its faults. Two objections have dogged eupraxosophy since its inception. One line of criticism has asked, "Why bother with a new term at all?" Tim Madigan, at the time editor of *Free Inquiry*, offered in response the historical parallel of T. H. Huxley, who, in 1869, felt the need for a new term. Being unable to identify with any of the theological or philosophical titles then on offer, he coined the word *agnostic*, which has remained in use to this day (Madigan, 8–10). What this attempted parallel did not address, however, was whether *eupraxosophy* did actually fill a need in the way that *agnostic* did.

A second line of criticism has asked, "Why *that* term?" One perceptive critic said that whatever the faults of humanism as a label, it is at least accessible. "Better stay on the ground (and, if necessary, in the mud) struggling to retain clarity with other people than to retreat to the stratosphere with a dictionary" (Matsumura, 3). Outside the United States, which didn't properly appreciate Kurtz's motivations, the reaction was blinking incomprehension. In Britain, in the context of a generally supportive review of the word, the reviewer was skeptical about what he saw as an "ungainly neologism" (O'Hara, 24).

Another, less commented upon, problem with eupraxsophy was Kurtz's anxiety to put as much distance between his new concept and religion. He did this by way of a robust critique of functionalist approaches to religion, stressing instead the differences in what humanists and religionists believe. At the same time, he wanted eupraxsophy to get beyond the squabbling over details he felt atheists and evangelicals were engaged in. But by insisting that the "positive outlook" of eupraxsophy could arise only from a naturalistic perspective, he shut down the possibility of forging common ground with like-minded religious progressives while also rendering the term unnecessary to those already within the humanist movement. Despite Kurtz's efforts, the term eupraxsophy has not been taken up by the humanist community.

KURTZ AS PROPHET OF PLANETARY HUMANISM

The other significant aspect of Kurtz's work, and one that has grown in importance through the second half of his career, is his being a prophet for planetary humanism. Speaking to a conference in Canada in 1991, Kurtz spoke of the need "to build an ethical commitment to the world community as our highest moral devotion" (Goicoechea et al., 324). While plenty of humanists have spoken in these terms, Kurtz has worked more consistently toward this aim than anyone else. He first wrote about it in *The Fullness of Life*, but it is characteristic of Kurtz that he then devoted time and effort to realizing this goal. The first significant milestone was the "Declaration of Interdependence," which he drafted for the Tenth World Congress of the IHEU, held in Buffalo, New York, in August 1988. The declaration was signed by some very prominent humanist scholars, like E. O. Wilson and Isaac Asimov.

The declaration calls for the creation of a world community built upon shared transnational values. It begins with the recognition that we need a new global consensus, the core of which is the understanding of our common humanity and of the moral truisms shared by us all: "It is time that we clearly enunciate these ethical principles so that they may be extended toward all members of the human family living on this planet." The declaration then itemizes a range of rights and responsibilities that are common to us all and ends with a set of aims that would constitute a program for planetary humanism:

The need to develop a worldwide awareness of our mutual interdependence.

The challenge to develop scientific education on a global scale along with an appreciation for critical intelligence and reason as ways to enhance human welfare.

The need to create new democratic and pluralistic institutions on a global scale.

A new global economic system based on economic cooperation and international solidarity.

The requirement of an international environmental monitoring agency which can oversee the appropriate standards for the disposal of industrial waste and the control of toxic emissions.

The duty to curtail excessive population growth, to maintain a healthy environment, and to preserve the earth's resources. ("A Declaration of Interdependence," 4–7)

Five years after the declaration, in 1993, a remarkably similar document was issued by the dissident Catholic theologian Hans Küng and endorsed by the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1993. Küng went on to write the widely acclaimed *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*. Nowhere was the priority of the Declaration of Interdependence acknowledged.

The most pressing challenge for all human beings in the twenty-first century is to adapt to the serious challenges faced by climate change and the growth of intolerance. Kurtz's essentially straightforward message that science, reason, and free inquiry can and should play an important role in these difficult circumstances remains as relevant today as it has ever been.

Some years later, Kurtz revisited the global interdependence theme with the third of his major manifesto projects, *The Humanist Manifesto 2000: A Call for a New Planetary Humanism*. The core insight of planetary humanism is that no major problems can be solved on anything less than a planetary scale. Climate change, the preservation of resources, the maintenance of clean air, population pressure, technological change, globalization—these are all planetwide problems that cannot be solved by this or that legislature working in isolation. And all the old tribalisms and antagonisms, whether of race, religion, creed, class, or culture, are—at best—incidental to the overriding fact of our common dependence on the Earth. It is now imperative that humans see themselves as humans first and that all more local and trivial affiliations be either jettisoned or consigned to some harmless category for our leisure hours. Related is the other core insight of planetary humanism: Any proper understanding of planetwide interdependence means that *Homo sapiens* isn't the only species to be taken into account. All species on the planet are inextricably interwoven in complex webs of interdependence. As part of outlining a new global agenda, the manifesto calls for

backing the United Nations as the principal coercive agency of the world;
supporting the existing international conventions regarding human rights;
fighting tax avoidance among the largest multinational corporations;
developing a suitably transnational system of international law; and

making a greater effort to raise awareness of and to combat environmental deterioration.

In order to put this agenda into effect, the *Humanist Manifesto 2000* advocates

- an effective global governance based on popular elections;
- a workable international security system and greater powers for the World Court;
- the creation of an effective planetary environmental monitoring body;
- an international system of taxation for the sole purpose of assisting the under-developed nations;
- the development of global institutions to monitor and regulate the behavior of multinational corporations; and
- the keeping alive of the free market of ideas.

Humanist Manifesto 2000 is the fullest humanist expression of the need for rationality, common effort, and global governance. Like the previous documents, *Humanist Manifesto 2000* was signed by a wide variety of some of the most reputable academic and other leaders in the world at the time, including many from outside the United States.

As if choreographed, *Humanist Manifesto 2000* appeared only shortly before the United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan announced the Millennium Development Goals, an ambitious program for the eradication of poverty. The Millennium Development Goals are clearly compatible with the principles of planetary humanism and the vision outlined in *Humanist Manifesto 2000*, so that working toward their successful implementation is one of the best ways to give practical expression to twenty-first-century humanism.

EVALUATING KURTZ'S LEGACY

Paul Kurtz's work has not received the attention it deserves. Hopefully this situation will change in the years to come. There remains a pressing need for a biography of him as well. It is too early to evaluate Kurtz's legacy, but a few comments can be made: One of the most significant successes of his career has been his work promoting a skeptical attitude toward paranormal claims. CSI-COP has spawned a worldwide movement and deserves much of the praise for consigning many paranormal movements—think of crop circles and UFOs—to the realm of quaint relics, alongside phrenology and divination.

In the area of humanist thinking, which this chapter has focused on, Kurtz deserves recognition for his career-long efforts to reorient humanism as a positive naturalistic worldview. In speaking of humanism as first and foremost a method of inquiry, he has understood better than most that humanism cannot operate as an immovable creed. He has also understood the need to articulate

a simple, attractive humanism, capable of being understood outside the academy. Inevitably he has come close to outlining the very creed he knows humanism cannot legitimately offer. His career can be seen as an ongoing series of attempts to square this particular circle. In this sense, therefore, Kurtz has lived and breathed his humanism consistently.

A second point is that Kurtz has understood the pressing need for institutions and means of communication for a program to have an ongoing impact. His very success in creating these has been a major reason for his unpopularity among some American humanists, who have shown less energy and single-mindedness in this respect and have therefore been less successful in attracting lucrative donations.

A more intractable weakness of Kurtz's humanism is the specifically American confidence in plenty that underpins and bankrolls his exuberance. While speaking on the meaning of life in one of his books, he wrote, "For the humanist the great folly is to squander his life, to miss what it affords, not to play it out" (*Fullness of Life*, 88). Elsewhere he described the "first humanist virtue" as "the development of one's own sense of power—of the belief that we *can* succeed, that our own preparations and efforts *will* pay off" (*Exuberance*, 175). This is all very well, so long as one can take for granted the arrival of the next meal and paycheck. But millions of people do not have this luxury, and humanism needs to speak to them as well.

A similar weakness is the entrepreneurial quality of his humanism. Later in *Fullness of Life*, he declared, "The full life in the last analysis is not one of quiet contentment, but the active display of my powers and of their development and expansion" (102). To succeed, he went on, is not simply to fulfill one's aims, but to exceed them. Without doubt, these are the qualities that have driven Kurtz to achieve so many valuable things. But as a model for everyone—as he maintained it was—it limits the appeal of his humanism to ambitious go-getters. As the Marxist philosopher Mihailo Marković noted, while anyone *may* have the potential to communicate meaningfully and to act creatively, what someone "crushed by the misery of the whole social environment" might actually choose to do is a different matter (Storer, 32). That choice certainly need not be directed toward something as abstract as self-realization.

The paradox in all this is Kurtz's undeniable record of practical aid and support for humanism outside the United States, notwithstanding a certain blindness to the restricted appeal of his brand of humanism outside the prosperous West. He was a leading figure in reorienting the IHEU to look beyond the confines of Northern Europe. And since founding the Center for Inquiry in 1991, he has consistently worked to build viable humanist organizations around the world. Thousands of Prometheus Books titles have been donated to impecunious humanist groups in developing countries. It is worth repeating: Nobody has done more to build and support humanism outside the United States than Paul Kurtz. As the leading spokesman for planetary humanism, that seems to qualify as his most impressive achievement.

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Corliss Lamont

Bill Cooke

Corliss Lamont (1902–1995) was born into the very upper reaches of American society. He could trace the arrival of his father's family in the United States to the 1750s and his Scottish ancestry back to the thirteenth century. His mother's family was no less illustrious, going back to William Bradford (1589–1657), who arrived on the *Mayflower* and later served as governor of Plymouth Colony. Another ancestor on his mother's side, Elihu Corliss, fought at Bunker Hill.

Thomas Lamont (1870–1948), Corliss's father, was the son of an impecunious Methodist minister from upper New York State. Clearly a capable youth, Thomas was accepted at Phillips Exeter Academy, which led to Harvard, before turning his extraordinary skills to business and finance. In 1911 he became a business partner of the banker and entrepreneur J. P. Morgan (1867–1943) and, after his death, chairman of the board of J. P. Morgan & Company. No less remarkable, Corliss's mother had taken an MA degree in philosophy at Columbia in 1898 and was a supporter of civil liberties, birth control, and a variety of other progressive causes. The Lamont family was conscientious, philanthropic, supportive of the arts, and cosmopolitan, and young Corliss grew up listening to some of the world's most influential thinkers at the family dining table.

LAMONT ON IMMORTALITY

His mother took Lamont's birth on Good Friday as a good omen for his future piety. She was to be disappointed. While still a student, he became familiar with atheist and socialist thinking, a familiarity that his fellow student Sidney Hook claimed the credit for (Hook, 237). This claim could be true

with respect to atheism, but not socialism. Lamont had heard discussion on socialism at the dinner table with guests like H. G. Wells. Lamont visited the Soviet Union several times and wrote enthusiastically about the Soviet achievement.

Lamont's PhD, taken at Columbia in 1932 under Frederick Woodbridge (1867–1940), was later published as *The Illusion of Immortality*. His interest in this area had been stimulated by his uncle and aunt, both devotees of spiritualism. He began his study holding conventional religious views, including a belief in life after death. But he ended it an atheist, convinced of the incompatibility of personal immortality with a naturalistic account of phenomena. All arguments for immortality, he wrote, “come down to the same point, namely that human personalities and their doings are intrinsically so valuable or so good, so important or so beautiful, that in all justice and reason they deserve, must have, and do receive immortality from the Powers-that-be in the universe” (161). But as Lamont recognized, anthropocentric conceit and the laws of nature are unhappy bedfellows.

The Illusion of Immortality was more than a simple debunking of the traditional conceptions of immortality. He was also concerned to broaden the range of ways we could think about immortality, which involved many more perspectives than simply living forever in some ethereal capacity. Lamont identified five alternatives to the crude presumption of personal immortality: ideal immortality, or the eternal moment that Spinoza and Santayana wrote of; material immortality, where the material that makes us up is subsumed after death back into nature; historical immortality, or the simple fact of our existence in time; biological immortality, or our continued existence through our children; and social immortality, or survival through the memory of our achievements (23).

Alongside this broadening of notions of immortality, Lamont wished to infuse the natural life with dignity and meaning. To relinquish personal immortality is not to give something up, for that thing was only an illusion. It is best, he said, not to “disbelieve in immortality, but to *believe in mortality*” (*Illusion of Immortality*, 272–273). And to make this transition is a significant ethical achievement, which can sustain our desire to seek out truth, and to accept its findings, even when they conflict with our most earnest desires.

Part of the appeal of Lamont's approach was his warm sympathy with the fervent desire most of us have for cheating death in some way or other. He was quite candid in admitting that he would much prefer to believe in personal immortality and would live forever if he could. But we need to be honest and look the facts straight in the face. Humanists, he wrote in an essay on immortality in 1967, “recognize that it [death] is one of the tragedies inherent in the great gift of life. We do not agonize over this fact, nor are we preoccupied with it” (“Crisis Called Death,” 284).

The Illusion of Immortality had a long life, going through three editions and remaining in print for forty years. It is still one of the most thorough

Lamont's first exercise in civics came while he was still at school. The school's baseball team had enjoyed an extraordinary run of wins, but it came to the seventeen-year-old's attention that the coach had been tampering with the balls his team would use the next day, making them harder and liable to be hit further. Overcoming school pride, Lamont felt it his duty to advise the principal of the situation, narrowly escaping a dunking in the river by 150 outraged schoolmates in the process.

critiques of personal immortality of the modern era and constitutes one of Lamont's signal services to naturalistic thought in the twentieth century. The year after *The Illusion of Immortality* appeared, he edited *Man Answers Death*, an anthology of poetry that deals with issues of human finitude. Lamont had a trained ear for poetry, going back to family evenings when members read poems to each other. His first program of study at Harvard had been English literature. He was also a longtime friend of John Masefield (1878–1967), who in 1930 became Britain's Poet Laureate.

HUMANISM AS A PHILOSOPHY

Lamont's major work was *Humanism as a Philosophy*, the product of a course he taught at Columbia called Philosophy of Naturalist Humanism, which ran from 1947 to 1959. The course, and the book it generated, was the first systematic attempt to offer a naturalistic outline of what humanism means and how it works. Before Lamont, the term *humanism* had been used in a variety of ways, none of them very satisfactory. F. C. S. Schiller (1864–1937) spoke of humanism as a subjectivist variety of pragmatism, while Unitarian progressives used the word in the sense now understood as religious humanism. And then there was Irving Babbitt (1865–1933), who spoke of humanism as a term of social and moral uplift. All these interpretations were set aside by the philosophical naturalism pioneered by Lamont's mentor F. J. E. Woodbridge, which other scholars developed in an influential group of essays, *Naturalism and the Human Spirit*, published in 1944. The other significant influence was George Santayana (1863–1952), whose combination of naturalism with a beautiful prose style and a refined poetic sensibility resonated very closely with Lamont's cast of mind. Lamont's humanism was an attractive synthesis of American philosophical naturalism with Santayana's aesthetic sensitivities.

Humanism as a Philosophy went through many editions, several translations, and a change of name—being retitled *The Philosophy of Humanism*—and became one of the most influential twentieth-century statements on humanism. And with good reason. Lamont's willingness to offer humanism as a philosophy

of living attracted praise from reviewers, whether they agreed with him or not. It is all very well, he wrote, for philosophy to analyze and criticize, “but I believe that it achieves its highest role in successful synthesis” (*Humanism as a Philosophy*, xvii). Along with an intellectual synthesis, Lamont also appreciated the genuinely transnational nature of humanism. It was not, he recognized, solely a “Eurocentric discourse,” as postmodernists would later assert.

More important still, Lamont was the first systematic thinker to appreciate fully the cosmic perspective as a precondition for humanism. Many others had spoken of the lessons of Copernicus and Darwin in dethroning *Homo sapiens* from the pedestal it had rather presumptuously built for itself. And many criticisms of religion had been made with this perspective in mind. But Lamont was the first to put it all together in a single, accessible package. His other significant contribution was his simple affirmations of what humanism is for, as opposed to his denunciations of what it is against: “Humanism is an *affirmative* philosophy. . . . We mortals delight in the sweetness of living rather than lamenting over its brevity. And we rejoice in being able to hand on the torch of life to future generations. Yes, this life is enough; this earth is enough; this great and eternal Nature is enough” (*Humanism as a Philosophy*, 183). As part of his packaging of humanism for nonspecialist readers, Lamont outlined eight central propositions of humanist philosophy:

1. A naturalistic cosmology regards nature as a constantly changing system of events existing independently of human consciousness.
2. Humanity is an evolutionary product entirely within nature, with the consequence, among other things, of there being no afterlife.
3. Human thinking takes place entirely within the brain and is as natural as walking or breathing.
4. Humanism’s ultimate faith is in the ability of humanity to solve its own problems and realize its own potential through reason and science applied with courage and vision.
5. True creative freedom belongs to human beings, who are,, “within reasonable limits,” the masters of their own destiny.
6. All human values are grounded in this-earthly experiences and relationships, and our highest loyalty is to humanity in general.
7. There should be the widest possible development of art and an awareness of beauty, including the appreciation of nature, as part of allowing aesthetic experience to become a pervasive reality in people’s lives.
8. There should be worldwide “democracy and peace on the foundations of a flourishing and co-operative economic order, both national and international.” (19–21)

These points, Lamont concluded, embody humanism in its most acceptable modern form. That is probably true, but they also illustrate well the historical roots and the transcultural core of humanism.

Although he didn't make the connection himself, there is a strong parallel between Lamont's eight-point outline of humanism and the Eight Steps outlined by Confucianists. In order to realize the Three Ways of achieving clear character, loving the people, and abiding in the highest good, the Confucianist work *The Great Learning* posited the Eight Steps: the investigation of things, the extension of knowledge, sincerity of the will, rectification of the mind, cultivation of the personal life, regulation of the family, national order, and world peace. Like the Eight Steps, Lamont's eight central propositions of humanist philosophy proceed in a specific order. Superficially, the Confucian order differs from the contemporary humanist order, but in fact, they build on similar insights. Where the Confucianists began from within the individual, Lamont formulated a series of propositions about the universe that reinforce a cosmic perspective and have ends in mind similar to those of the Confucian steps. Both seek to rid the individual of delusions born of hubris. And both work on the supposition that if everyone could manage this process, then world peace and harmony (the last point in both systems) could be achieved.

This neat parallel with the Confucian Eight Steps was lost in later editions when Lamont adjusted and added to them, so that, by the fifth edition, published in the 1960s, there were ten central propositions in humanist philosophy—altogether a less happy parallel to work with. The third proposition was dropped, Lamont's having recognized that it was essentially a repetition of the second, and three new ones were added. Appearing in the sixth proposition (the original fourth, fifth, and sixth propositions all moving up a number) was a statement about the good life: "Humanism believes that the individual attains the good life by harmoniously combining personal satisfactions and continuous self-development with significant work and other activities that contribute to the welfare of the community" (*Philosophy of Humanism*, 13). That is a worthwhile addition. And then, at the end, Lamont added two further propositions. The ninth seems confused and not entirely to the point, dealing with the "complete social implementation of reason and scientific method; and thereby in the use of democratic procedures, including full freedom of expression and civil liberties, throughout all areas of economic, political, and cultural life." The third addition, slotted as proposition number ten, made more sense: "Humanism, in accordance with scientific method, believes in the unending questioning of basic assumptions, including its own" (14). This is a very important observation. Lamont actually built into his understanding of humanism the means for subjecting it to constant review, criticism, and challenge; indeed, this process is required. And he could not do otherwise, because he saw this attitude as implicit in both science and democracy (*Independent Mind*, 20). The ten-point humanist program remained largely unchanged for the rest of his life. He revisited it in his autobiography, expanding on some points, but leaving it essentially unchanged (*Yes to Life*, 75–79).

Lamont also took care to thread his conception of humanism back through history and was as much at home with literature, poetry, and music as he was

with philosophy. He outlined a broad transcultural appreciation of the humanistic impulse, citing figures as varied as Confucius and Swinburne, Beethoven and Euripides, George Eliot and Erasmus. It is a shame he didn't develop this chapter, which, as it stands, amounts to little more than a list of great names.

Humanism as a Philosophy was, and remains, a good book. It is always easy to pick holes in a book half a century old, but two flaws seem worth pointing out, both of which require healthy doses of hindsight to bring to light. The first of these weaknesses, when viewed from the twenty-first century, is a complacency, a confidence that history is moving inexorably in the direction of humanism; that progress and secularization are the same thing; and that superstition is self-evidently a thing of the past. So confident was Lamont that he even felt able to question the law of entropy. "Genuine Humanists," he wrote, "cannot for a moment admit that man must necessarily be defeated in his career in the universe" (144). And yet, fifty years later, it seems that genuine humanists must acknowledge that very point and even make it central to their humanism. And an offshoot of this complacency is an inconsistency in fully ridding our thoughts of anthropocentric conceit: "Whenever a thinker in any field treats the this-worldly welfare of man as central, he treads on Humanist ground" (40). Comments like these were made in the context of a general awareness of the dangers and delusions of anthropocentrism. Lamont was critical, for instance, of supernatural religion and idealist philosophies for having "made man central in a perverse and exaggerated way," and for teaching "a cosmology of deceit and a superstitious anthropomorphism that militates against men's true good in their one and only life" (40). And a key element in his criticism of personal immortality is the anthropocentric conceit it requires to presume oneself worthy of such a destiny.

Much more damaging, both for Lamont's reputation and for the credibility of humanism, was his inability to cast as critical an eye over his support for the Soviet Union as he did over most other matters. This observation requires less hindsight, as he was criticized at the time on this point. But even here, he wasn't always the unthinking propagandist he has been made out to be. He was wrong to whitewash the Stalinist show trials, as he did, but after the war he became somewhat more critical, for instance, of the tendency exhibited by many Marxists to see the victory of socialism as inevitable. His attempts to defend Marxist theory from this charge, however, were less convincing and were awkwardly placed. Toward the end of *Humanism as a Philosophy* Lamont felt the need for a passionate claim to democracy as a core humanist commitment. He could easily have just wound the book up with a flurry of platitudes; instead, he developed the claim by isolating twelve intersecting elements of democracy. Beginning with political democracy, he then argued convincingly for civil liberties and democracy before the law as sufficiently important to deserve special attention. He went on to list eight subsets of democracy that must all be active and healthy for the political democracy to be called thriving. They still read well six decades later: organizational

democracy; economic democracy; social democracy; cultural and intellectual democracy; religious and philosophic democracy; and democracy between sexes, ages, and races. He wrapped the list up with international democracy (313–329).

All well and good, until, only on the next page, he indulged in a lengthy apology for the Soviet Union, declaring it “patently unrealistic to expect the Russians and the Chinese would be able to advance immediately to a fully natured democratic way of life” (*Humanism as a Philosophy*, 330). Lamont’s apology for communist failures had the effect of drastically undermining his wise articulation of democracy on the preceding pages. And opponents of humanism were not slow to notice that his circumlocutions for Stalinism came on the heels of ringing denunciations of the many shortfalls in the realization of American democracy. It was passages such as these that so enraged his critics, inside and outside the humanist movement, and weakened his argument. Lamont recognized this weakness by dropping from later editions these pages of apology for the Soviet record on democracy. But by then it was too late: In the feverish atmosphere of the 1950s, humanism had been linked irrevocably with being “soft on communism.”

Opponents of humanism, from Senator Joseph McCarthy to Tim La Haye, have fed on this link ever since. And within the movement, Sidney Hook led an ongoing and frequently bad-tempered debate on it over five decades. Right up to his autobiography, written in the 1980s, Hook was still sniping at Lamont for views he had expressed in the 1930s. The dispute came to an end only with Hook’s death in 1989. If Hook’s persistence was unattractive, it has to be said that he had a point. Lamont’s well-meant but misguided support for the Soviet Union was enough to undo much of the good he did in an otherwise wise and civilized rendition of humanism.

While these weaknesses undermine, they do not overthrow the value in Lamont’s warm humanism. He helped consummate the marriage between humanism and naturalism. He also showed a far greater appreciation of nature than had been the case before him. And following Santayana, he had a more genuine appreciation for the arts as an intrinsic part of the humanist experience.

CIVIL LIBERTIES

If Lamont’s contribution had been limited to a few good books, we might have less use for him now. But this was not the case. Nowhere more than in the area of civil liberties was Lamont’s life put to such good use. While still a young man, he was motivated by civil liberties issues. The Scopes trial in 1925 and the harassment of Margaret Sanger, in particular, stood out as defining issues. In 1929 he led a campaign against Harvard’s firing of a group of scrub-women to avoid paying them the already modest minimum wage. When Harvard

refused to budge, Lamont organized the funds from his own sources and those of his friends. He was involved in tussles like this for the rest of his life.

The immediate threat to civil rights became apparent to Lamont in the years after World War II, when red-baiting reached its crescendo. He had faced jibes on this score for twenty years, but they were now becoming more serious. Even the American Civil Liberties Union, of which he was a board member, fell victim to the anticommunist paranoia. He was eased off the board in 1953 in response to fear about his political views. In 1952 Lamont had tried to meet the challenge head-on with a pamphlet entitled *Why I Am Not a Communist*. It didn't work; his position was too nuanced for the climate of the day. Nothing less than ferocious denunciation would have been acceptable.

"There will never come a time, no matter what kind of economic system we have, when we can afford to lean back and say: 'We don't have to worry about civil liberties any more.' The repressive tendencies latent in Man will forever spring back if given half a chance."

—Corliss Lamont, *Yes to Life: Memoirs of Corliss Lamont*, 115.

The first skirmish in Lamont's long-running civil liberties battle with what he called the mood of a "delirious anti-Communist witch-hunt" (*Yes to Life*, 105) began in 1946, when he was subpoenaed by the Un-American Activities Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives (HUAC) to appear in his capacity as chairman of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship. HUAC wanted access to the council's financial records, which Lamont did not have. The council's treasurer, Rev. Richard Morford, who did have the documents, went to prison for three months.

Lamont's finest hour was the significant role he played in the bringing to heel of Senator Joseph McCarthy (1909–1957), who, in his capacity as chairman of the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, was ruining the lives of many people by implicating them as communist subversives. McCarthy's motives and tactics were little different from those of other famous twentieth-century judicial bullies, such as Andrei Vishinsky in Stalin's Russia and Roland Freisler in Hitler's Germany.

On September 22, 1953, Lamont received a subpoena from McCarthy's committee relating to a U.S. Army manual that featured his *Peoples of the Soviet Union* in its bibliography. The manual was part of the army's intelligence effort to understand the nature of the Soviet Union with, if necessary, a view to combating it more effectively. With only twenty-four hours to prepare his defense, Lamont contacted a prominent lawyer who had already publicly criticized McCarthy's tactics, and sought his advice.

The next day, Lamont read out a four-point challenge to the legal and constitutional powers of the committee to inquire into his beliefs. He then specifically denied he had ever been a member of the Communist Party, to deflect what would be the main thrust of McCarthy's questions, and he refused to answer any other questions, even those that would have helped his cause, unless they were straightforward matters of historical record.

McCarthy insisted that the hearing be in "executive session," so that no account of the hearing was made available to the press; but later, McCarthy himself gave his own version to the press. Telford Taylor, the American prosecutor at Nuremberg, called that "an outrageous procedure, obviously designed for the sole purpose of publicity" (*Yes to Life*, 123).

It was not until July the following year that McCarthy initiated proceedings against Lamont in the Senate for his refusal to answer questions the previous year. On August 16, 1954, the Senate voted seventy-one to three to cite Lamont for contempt, with twenty-two members absent (there then being only forty-eight states and therefore only ninety-six senators).

Lamont could have been forgiven for feeling cowed at this point. But three months later his attorney filed a request before Federal District Judge Edward Weinfeld that the indictment be dismissed, on the grounds cited at the first appearance before McCarthy's committee. On July 27, 1955, Judge Weinfeld granted the motion to dismiss the indictment, agreeing that McCarthy's committee had not had the legal or constitutional authority to investigate Lamont in the first place. The government took the case to a court of appeal, which, on August 14, 1956, confirmed Judge Weinfeld's decision. Recognizing it had lost the case, the government did not proceed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Lamont, understandably, was thrilled. As he recalled in his autobiography: "This left the McCarthy Committee without any legal standing and made *all* of its many hearings and investigations lawless and beyond Congressional power" (*Yes to Life*, 126).

Lamont's victory was an important defeat for McCarthy, whose power was already beginning to fade. The humbling of Senator McCarthy did not, of course, mean the end of the harassment. For seven years Lamont was unable to get a passport because he refused to fill in the section of the form that asked whether he was a member of the Communist Party. He regained his passport only in 1958 when the Supreme Court declared the actions of the State Department unconstitutional. That decision was a response to a suit brought by two of Lamont's friends who had been discriminated against in the same way.

The most significant legal victory won by Lamont for civil liberties began in 1963, when he received a card from the U.S. Post Office informing him it was holding back a copy of the *Peking Review* on the grounds that it was communist propaganda. Lamont did not even subscribe to the *Peking Review*, which was sent to him gratis. The Post Office had decided that it would withhold all such material until it got a positive reply from the recipient that he or she did in fact want to receive it, knowing full well most people would take

fright at this point and deny knowledge. Rightfully incensed, Lamont sued the Postmaster General on the grounds that the Post Office was violating his rights under the First Amendment. The Federal District Court in New York rejected his case, so he took it to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court agreed to hear the case and decided on May 24, 1965, that the Post Office's statute was in fact unconstitutional. The decision was eight to zero, with one justice not taking part. *Lamont v. Postmaster General* is seen as a landmark decision, one that helped entrench civil liberties in the United States.

In the new climate after Watergate, civil liberties were strengthened by the passage of legislation like the Freedom of Information Act (1975), which permits people to gain access to Central Intelligence Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation records. Lamont sought access to his CIA and FBI records and was bemused to find 2,788 pages on him. The FBI originally released only 2,055, but Lamont subsequently got most of the others.

The file revealed what he had long suspected: He had been closely followed by the FBI for more than thirty years. Like McCarthy, J. Edgar Hoover had a particular dislike for Lamont and ensured that he was closely monitored, even to the point of asking questions of staff and tradespeople. As part of his security check before becoming ambassador to India in 1961, John Kenneth Galbraith was asked why, fourteen years previously, he had lived in the same apartment building as Lamont! In *Lamont v. Department of Justice* (1979), it was ruled that the FBI had had no legal right to proceed against Lamont in the way it had. Lamont also won a case against the CIA, which had long been intercepting his correspondence with scholars in the Soviet Union. In 1976 he sued the CIA, claiming that its opening of his mail was unconstitutional, and asking for \$150,000. He won the case but was awarded a paltry \$2,000.

In a fitting finale to his long career as a civil liberties activist, in 1982 Lamont donated \$1 million to establish a chair in civil liberties at Columbia Law School. At the time of writing, the holder of the chair is Vincent A. Blasi, a specialist in the First Amendment.

Corliss Lamont is a useful reminder of the America the religious right wants us to forget: the America of enlightened, nonreligious socially active liberals. In an age of conspicuous consumption and growing disparity between rich and poor, the example of a wealthy man with a social conscience is a valuable lesson. And at a time when a new breed of noisier atheists is apparently justifying the widely held suspicion of stridency and intolerance, Lamont's wise and restrained humanism is a valuable antidote.

Two responses to his lengthy civil liberties campaigns will help illustrate something about Corliss Lamont. In 1955, before the McCarthy case had

finally been decided, the Teachers Union of New York awarded Lamont its annual award for “valiant and unswerving defense of intellectual freedom” in standing up to McCarthy. While obviously happy to receive the award, Lamont was honest and self-effacing enough to note that his independent wealth protected him from the consequences of losing his job that had befallen so many other victims of McCarthy’s inquisition (*Yes to Life*, 128). They, he insisted, were the real heroes.

Another response to the McCarthy saga reveals Lamont’s principal weakness. Concluding his account of the whole episode in his autobiography, he couldn’t help but observe that it had underscored the truth of Marxist criticisms of democracy: “It has always been the claim of Marxists and Communists that capitalist countries are insincere about democracy and civil liberties, and are likely to throw them overboard in a time of crisis. Now this is precisely what has been happening in America, where the triumphs of reactionary demagogues paradoxically become triumphs of Communist prophets” (*The Independent Mind*, 27; *Yes to Life*, 127–128). It doesn’t take hindsight to see the weakness of this assessment.

CONCLUSION

Corliss Lamont’s weaknesses are clear enough. Unlike H. G. Wells or Bertrand Russell, he was less inclined to distinguish sharply between socialism as an ideal and support for the Soviet Union as its most appropriate exemplar. That it took Lamont much longer than most people of his generation to review his attitude toward the Soviet Union, and later China, Vietnam, and Cuba, remains the millstone around his neck with respect to his legacy as a humanist thinker and leader.

But despite these appreciable weaknesses, Corliss Lamont was one of the most significant and coherent voices of naturalistic humanism to emerge after World War II. His humanism was imbued with a bracing cosmic perspective while also being warm and open to life’s joys. No less important, Lamont lived his life’s principles, becoming one of the most important defenders of civil liberties at a time when they were under considerable attack. He was selfless with his time, courageous in the defense of his beliefs, and generous with his money, endowing a great many worthwhile organizations, campaigns, and institutions.

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H. P. Lovecraft

Robert M. Price

Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890–1937) is justly known as one of the titans of what he himself called weird fiction, a prolific author of short stories and novellas, most of which appeared in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*. Living most of his life in Providence, Rhode Island, with a brief married stint in Brooklyn, New York, he was a quiet and reclusive man, though convivial and generous with his numerous friends and literary colleagues. Though he had not slept away from home till age thirty, he later became an avid traveler, sampling the sights from Quebec to Louisiana. His father died hospitalized with syphilis and its complications, but tests showed Lovecraft himself to be free of the taint. Given the shadows of morbidity he was accustomed to write about, one almost wonders if he would have preferred to die confined to a madhouse, as his mother did, rather than succumbing to Bright's disease after a brief and painful struggle.

Lovecraft's youthful health was as delicate as his mind was keen, and while never finishing high school, he devoured the library of his maternal grandfather. Thus he became an accomplished autodidact and developed a lifelong preference for the idiom of the eighteenth century. Edgar Allan Poe, he confessed, was "my God of Fiction" (*Selected Letters*, 1.20). Perhaps his style is most like Poe's, though HPL (as he was commonly called) was clearly influenced as well by Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, Lord Dunsany, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and John Taine (Eric Temple Bell). Many consider Lovecraft Poe's equal if not his superior in the field of macabre fiction. But Lovecraft was also an essayist, publishing voluminously in the pages of amateur journals edited by him and his friends. But his greatest literary output was his personal letters. So great was their number and their length that some have theorized, not without reason, that Lovecraft may have been the victim of a type of epilepsy producing hypergraphia, the irresistible urge to write. It is in

his letters that his nearly lifelong atheism is on clearest display, though one can find it portrayed in the fiction as well.

Young Howard did not respond as planned to the catechism offered him, hopping off the assembly line as soon as he got the chance, no doubt to the secret relief of his would-be mentors. One inevitably thinks of the scene of young Jesus engaging in halachic dialectic with the temple scribes and elders in Luke 2:41–51.

My father was of [the Anglican] faith, and was married by its rites, yet, having been educated in my mother's distinctively Yankee family, I was early placed in the Baptist Sunday school. There, however, I soon became exasperated by the literal Puritanical doctrines, and constantly shocked my preceptors by expressing scepticism of much that was taught me. It became evident that my young mind was not of a religious cast, for the much exhorted "simple faith" in miracles and the like came not to me. I was not long forced to attend the Sunday school, but read much in the Bible from sheer interest. The more I read the Scriptures, the more foreign they seemed to me. I was infinitely fonder of the Graeco-Roman mythology, and when I was eight astounded the family by declaring myself a Roman pagan. Religion struck me as so vague a thing at best, that I perceived no advantage of any one system over another. I had really adopted a sort of Pantheism, with the Roman gods as personified attributes of deity. (Letter to Maurice Winter Moe, January 16, 1915; *Selected Letters* 1.10)

This precocious skepticism was no doubt related to his early thirst for scientific knowledge. As a lad he studied the heavens, if not heaven, even writing his own astronomy columns for several local newspapers. Years later, the powdery residue of his chemical experiments was evident on the cellar floor. Some saw it and imagined the youth was engaged in witchcraft such as his fiction would later depict.

UNWELCOME REVELATIONS OF SCIENCE

Lovecraft lived through the famous Scopes monkey trial immortalized on the stage and in film as *Inherit the Wind*. He knew firsthand the panic felt by many people at the disclosures of modern science, discoveries that tended to minimize human greatness in the scheme of things. People loathed and feared the prospect of having to admit that they were kissing cousins of the gorilla and the chimp, much less the amoeba and the salamander. Like their successors among creationists and fundamentalists today, they preferred superstition to science. Lovecraft epitomized these pathetic fears beautifully in the opening of his classic horror tale "The Call of Cthulhu":

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst

of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. (*Dunwich Horror*, 125)

Here is pretty much the same sentiment, this time aimed pointedly at religion, expressed in a letter sent around to his correspondents Reinhart Kleiner, Ira Cole, and Maurice W. Moe:

A mere knowledge of the approximate dimensions of the visible universe is enough to destroy forever the notion of a personal godhead whose whole care is expended on puny mankind, and whose only genuine and original Messiah was dispatched to save the insignificant vermin, or men, who inhabit this one relatively microscopic globe. Not that science positively refutes religion—it merely makes religion seem [so] monstrously improbable that a large majority of men can no longer believe in it. (April 1917; *Selected Letters*, 1.44)

The passage evidences Lovecraft's personal philosophy of "cosmicism," a poignant, almost masochistic philosophy of sober reckoning with human insignificance in the cosmic scheme. Astronomy was by itself enough to shake man loose from his imagined centrality in a world fancied as the special creation of God, set carefully like a jewel in the middle of a black velvet mat surrounded by lesser diamonds, the stars. Christianity presupposed, and was designed for, a smaller earth in a smaller universe, a big fish in a small pond. As such it rightly perishes with medieval geocentrism.

Though HPL himself would have plenty to say about the social disadvantages of taking Christian teaching seriously, the principle reason he opposed belief was not pragmatic but decidedly theoretical, as he told Maurice W. Moe in no uncertain terms: "Your 'agnostic' [character] has neglected to mention the very crux of all agnosticism—namely that the Judaeo-Christian mythology is NOT TRUE" (May 15, 1918; *Selected Letters*, 1.60). It is remarkable that the self-educated Lovecraft seemed to grasp the full scope of the deadly impact of nineteenth-century research and discovery upon traditional belief:

Scholarship was shewing the Judaeo-Christian Bible to be just another Oriental mélange of myth, history, poetry, and ethics. . . . By 1900 there was not much intellectual reason to believe in the supernatural. . . . The synonymity of faith and folklore, and the similarity of Jehovah and Santa Claus, became clearly apparent to the coolly discerning. (Letter to Frank Belknap Long, February 20, 1929; *Selected Letters*, 2.271)

To think clearly about the cosmos in the light of contemporary information is to abandon any possibility of believing in the fantastic and capricious orthodoxies

On occasion, Lovecraft would assert that his shedding of religious belief occurred at the incredibly early age of five. In the essay "A Confession of Unfaith," he stated, "My first positive utterance of a sceptical nature probably occurred before my fifth birthday," and went on to say, "Not long afterwards I was placed in the 'infant class' at the Sunday school of the venerable First Baptist Church . . . and there resigned all vestiges of Christian belief" (*Collected Essays*, 5.145). But Lovecraft may have been confusing this episode with a later one that occurred when he was twelve:

"How well I recall my tilts with Sunday-School teachers during my last period of compulsory attendance! I was 12 years of age, and the despair of the institution. None of the answers of my pious preceptors would satisfy me, and my demands that they cease taking things for granted quite upset them. Close reasoning was something new in their little world of Semitic mythology. At last I saw that they were hopelessly bound to unfounded dogmata and traditions, and thenceforward ceased to treat them seriously. Sunday-School became to me simply a place wherein to have a little harmless fun spoofing the pious mossbacks. My mother observed this, and no longer sought to enforce my attendance."

—letter to Rheinhart Kleiner, March 7, 1920; *Selected Letters*, 1.110–111

of yesterday—be they Buddhistic, Judaic, Christian, Hindoo, Mohametan, or any other brand. (Letter to Maurice W. Moe, August 3, 1931; *Selected Letters*, 3.389)

Religion has served its purpose, & is meaningless in the light of today's understanding of the universe. We now perceive *that there is no "why" of things*—that, indeed, the whole concept of a "why" is based upon an obsolete perspective. (Letter to Natalie H. Wooley, May 2, 1936; *Selected Letters*, 5.242)

Lovecraft knew quite well that the validity of a notion is not threatened by the manner, however bizarre, in which it may first have come to light. That would be the genetic fallacy. But he was also on guard against the chicanery of religious apologetics:

And when anthropology teaches us that certain traditions of theology had a definite origin in some special condition leading to delusion, we are completely justified in maintaining that these traditions—with their manifestly false origin—*have not one chance in a million* of being the true explanations of the things they profess to explain. It would be too much of a coincidence if our ignorant and blundering forefathers should have *happened* to hit without any real data or logical method at their disposal, upon infinitely profound truths in complex

matters which even today are unreachable. When we know that the reason people believe in a thing is false, we have a right to guess that the belief itself is exceedingly flimsy. Today all the traditional assumptions regarding “god,” “spirit,” “immortality,” etc., etc. are pretty clearly traced to delusive conditions, fears, and wishes of primitive life. *If such things as gods, immortality, etc. did exist, they could never have been really known by the people who made the myths.* The myths, conclusively, are false. (Letter to Robert E. Howard, August 16, 1932; *Selected Letters*, 4.55)

For example, the notion of dying and “going to heaven” began as a function of the false supposition that there is a parallel realm vertically above us, where God dwells among the stars. Astronomy has exploded the underlying world picture, so what reason can there be to shift gears and posit that God dwells instead in, say, some other dimension? It would be purely arbitrary.

As Lovecraft saw it, all religious worldviews were cloud castles of pure speculation and daydream. They might embody nice ideas, but that provides no reason at all to believe in them. And before we entertain any romantic talk about making a heroic leap of faith, or of taking Pascal’s wager, let us realize we are jumping into a surging maelstrom of implausibilities:

Let us grant that *in theory* the doctrine of Buddha, or of Mohammed, or of Lao-tse, or of Christus, or of Zoroaster, or of some Congo witch-doctor, or of T. S. Eliot, or of Mary Baker Eddy, or of Dionysus, or of Plato, or of Ralph Waldo Emerson, has *just as much or as little positive evidence for it as has any other attempted explanation of the cosmos.* So far, so good. *But this concession cannot possibly be made without extending equal theoretical authority to Chambers’ Yellow Sign, Dunsany’s Pegana, your [Frank Belknap Long’s] Tindalos, Klarkash-Ton’s Tsathoggua, my Cthulhu, or any other fantastic concoction anybody may choose to invent. Who can disprove any such concoction, or say that it is not “esoterically true” even if its creator did think he invented it in jest or fiction?* (Letter to Frank Belknap Long, November 22, 1930; *Selected Letters*, 3.225–226)

Here Lovecraft refers to various fictive entities hatched by himself, Robert W. Chambers, Lord Dunsany, Frank Belknap Long, and Clark Ashton Smith. And his eccentric friend William Lumley had already proposed to him that HPL’s mythology of Cthulhu and the Old Ones, invented for use in his horror tales, was actually true, and that Lovecraft had been an unwitting channel for their revelation to mankind. Lovecraft’s point, then, is that, if Muhammad is deemed credible, Lumley is no less so: “As for ‘god’—there is of course no theoretical barrier to the existence of a ‘cosmic intelligence,’ yet *absolutely nothing indicates such a thing.* On the contrary, the notion never arises except through traditional suggestions based on the mythical perspectives of primitive man” (letter to August W. Derleth, January 23, 1931; *Selected Letters*, 3.281).

LOVECRAFT THE GRAND INQUISITOR

If Lovecraft was pessimistic about the willingness or the ability of the common run of mankind to face the threatening facts of science, he did not have contempt for them, though his attitude may well be characterized as patronizing. His stance was very much that of the ancient Gnostics in that he believed the straight truth was reserved for a self-selected elite (to which any might belong who saw fit). But it would be no service to the majority to deprive them of the only comfort available to them. They are, as Paul dubbed them, the “weaker brethren.” Thus, in most of his statements on the matter, HPL rejected the proselytizing, debunking zeal of the typical village atheist. In a manner that must appear shocking to today’s crusading atheists and secular humanists, Lovecraft urged that sleeping dogmas be allowed to lie until one day they might die peacefully in their sleep:

All rationalism tends to minimise the value and importance of life, to decrease the sum total of human happiness. In many cases the truth may cause suicidal or nearly suicidal depression. Therefore, I concede that the church deserves support as long as it can exist, and that agnosticism ought never to be diffused artificially. Yea, more. I will concede that men of religion are justified in hindering the spread of agnosticism among those whose opinions are not particularly settled, and who might easily be swayed either way. But ordinary sense tells us that faith cannot hang on forever. (Letter to Maurice W. Moe, May 15, 1918; *Selected Letters*, 1.65–66)

I fear that all theism consists mostly of reasoning in circles, and guessing or inventing what we do not know. . . . The orthodox clergy continue to assert a complete understanding of all these things, brushing inquiry aside either by sophistry or mysticism, or by evasion and sanctified horror. Why must men of sense thus delude themselves with notions of personal and “loving” gods, spirits, and demons? All this sort of thing is good enough for the rabble, but why should rational brains be tormented with such gibberish? It is perfectly true that the conception of a personal force is a vast help in managing the millions, and in giving them much hope and happiness that truth does not convey. Viewing the question in that light, I am a friend of the church, and would never seek to disturb or diminish its influence among those who are able to swallow its doctrines. I even wish I could believe them myself—it would be so comfortable to know that one day I shall sprout wings and go up to heaven for a talk with Alexander Pope and Sir Isaac Newton! (Letter to Kleiner, Cole, and Moe, October 1916; *Selected Letters*, 1.28)

I think the organized church will last for many generations to come—as a social pose and artistic gesture on the part of the educated, and as a focus of ignorant faith—as always—on the part of the emotional herd. (Letter to Zealia Brown Reed Bishop, February 13, 1928; *Selected Letters*, 2.228)

Agnosticism and atheism mean nothing to a peasant or workman. . . . Take away his Christian god and saints, and he will worship something else. Many a crude man has been talked into thinking himself an atheist, so that he loudly denies Jehovah and the Virgin and carries a load of Haldeman-Julius blue books in one pocket—yet in his other pocket he is likely to have a rabbit's foot. (Letter to Woodburn Harris, February 25–March 1, 1929; *Selected Letters*, 2.310)

That is why religion continues to hang on even when we know it has no foundation in reality. That crazy old half-Tartar Bolshevik Lenin stumbled on one snappy mouthful of truth when he said, "Religion is opium for the people." It's just that—and the only reason vast numbers of cultivated men stay cheerful is that they keep doped up on that same obsolete mythology. But that stuff can't last forever. We know too god-damned much about Nature now to have it work. Reaction will try to keep it alive for another generation—we shall see desperate and damn fool movements like "Humanism," neopopery, Harry Emerson Fosdickism, and so on—but all that will peter out with the dying off of the last generations reared in genuinely subjective religious faith. (Letter to James F. Morton, April 1, 1930; *Selected Letters*, 3.139)

THE VALUE OF CHRISTIANITY FOR US

But Lovecraft's appreciation of religion, and Christianity in particular, was not merely as a sop to the poor unfortunates who still needed it. He admitted that he, too, cherished it as part of his cultural inheritance. But he distinguished sharply between fondness and even loyalty to it, on the one hand, and belief in it, on the other:

We know well, after only a moment of scientific reflection, that any attempt at enforcing the actual fantastic and idealistic precepts of Christ would lead at once to utter anarchy, collapse, and cultural extinction. However—I'm as well aware as anyone else of the enormous extent to which the Christian tradition—whatever be its original lack of appropriateness—is now woven into our lives, art, and literature after thirteen-hundred and more years of continuous profession by our main stream of civilization. Like it or not, the general forms are fixed upon us, so that only a thoughtless radical or cultural parvenu could for a moment think of doing away with its atmosphere and externals as a social and aesthetic force among us. No one loves the memory of old moss-covered abbeys and the sweet chimes of Gothic belfries at evening more than I. No one exceeds me in reverence for the quaint and sonorous rituals of antique devotion—the organised symbolisation of our lives and the formulated expressions of our emotions—and the pure strain of poetry that runs alike through the exotic Old Testament, the classically dramatic Christ-mythus, and the quaint legends and beautiful traditions of the church. (Letter to Bernard Austin Dwyer, March 26, 1927; *Selected Letters*, 2.119)

Christ is worthless to us except as his myth is mixed up in our childhood memories—infantile prayers, Christmas trees, shiny pennies at Sunday-School—and our elder aesthetic appreciations—Georgian steeples and Gothick apses, organ litanies, incense, emotional mysticism, etc., etc. He is of value only as the half-Italian, half-Flemish thin man whom we see in pictures, or the little blonde English boy on Christmas cards. This is the contribution of the myth to our own vital heritage. Actually, we don't know yet whether or not any such one person really existed—and in his Coptic or Nestorian or Byzantine form he is a total loss to us westerners. (Letter to James F. Morton, October 30, 1929; *Selected Letters*, 3.48)

He took a dim view of the advocates of “neo-popery,” as he called it, people who, for the love of comfort in a cold universe, took credulity for a virtue and bade all to believe in Catholicism, as they still do, for the “richness” of its worldview.

PROTESTANT ATHEIST

Lovecraft did not have precisely the same quarrel with Protestantism. As we will shortly see, he admired Protestantism for its refusal to brook anything but the truth (a resolution often enough shirked, but still a noble goal). He disdained Protestantism insofar as it flinched in the face of overwhelming scientific, historical, and psychological evidence that its central beliefs were, in fact, false:

Only the real Protestants—best exemplified by the Puritans of the Massachusetts-Bay—ever attempted to carry out *in fact* what every so-called “Christian,” by virtue of the silly dogmata he swallows, nominally believes himself commanded to carry out. All of the dogs flinch & shirk except the English Puritan—& he tries to *do* as he *believes*. . . . If you're not prepared to do what your Bible says, then get out from behind the skirts of the Holy Virgin and confess your honest paganism like a man! (Letter to Frank Belknap Long, February 27, 1931; *Selected Letters*, 3.306)

Part of the old Protestant tradition . . . involved a ruthless sweeping aside of shams & a rigid quest for truth at any cost—no matter whether it overthrew everything in church & state that went before it. Our forefathers kicked out the rotten carcass of Popery first, & then, in the New World, began kicking out the simple-minded dogmatic bigotry which was left. The Massachusetts Puritans—honest fools—were the first stage. The anti-Puritan revolt which founded Rhode Island . . . represents another stage. Roger Williams called himself simply a “seeker,” & would be bound by no creed. The Unitarians are another stage. . . . Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick is another. Harry Elmer Barnes, Charles Francis Potter, & the ethical humanists form another. *They are all far more perfect traditionalists than your sniveling little neo-papists & Chesterbellocs*, because they are functioning absolutely in line with their original ancestral impetus. (Letter to Frank Belknap Long, February 27, 1931; *Selected Letters*, 3.333)

As Lovecraft saw it, he was being perfectly consistent with, and even obedient to, the heritage of Protestantism by rejecting Christianity on the same basis on which his forebears had rejected the priesthood and mummery of Catholicism. Preferring Protestantism to Catholicism, he went on to draw further distinctions. Lovecraft did not hold all expressions of religion equally in contempt. Here is his hierarchy:

"All I can say is that I think it is *damned unlikely* that anything like a central cosmic will, a spirit world, or an eternal survival of personality exist [*sic*]. They are the most preposterous and unjustified of all the guesses which can be made about the universe, and I am not enough of a hair-splitter to pretend that I don't regard them as arrant and negligible moonshine. In theory I am an *agnostic*, but pending the appearance of rational evidence I must be classed, practically and provisionally, as an *atheist*."

—H. P. Lovecraft, Letter to Robert E. Howard, August 16, 1932;
Selected Letters, 4.57.

Of the various mythologies dominant in the Anglo-Saxon world one might form a scale based on relative absurdity. The least irrational undoubtedly is the very liberal theism represented by Dr. Fosdick and a few other actual thinkers among theologians. Next comes ordinary Unitarianism. Below this stand the loosely liberalized Evangelical sects whose orthodox tenets are quietly dropped one by one—Congregationalists, Presbyterians, & the best grade of Baptists. Next—though much higher as an *aesthetic* proposition—comes the Anglican church with its ingeniously evaded 39 articles, & after that, (though higher up *aesthetically*) the ancient Catholic hierarchy with its impossible assumptions & eel-like logic-twisting. Lowest of all are the literal & orthodox evangelical sects—the dense and wilfully brainless Presbyterians, Baptists, & Methodists with their hysterical “kiver to kiver” hillbilly gospel. And the Mormons, Christian Scientists, Holy Rollers, &c. fit in intellectually near the bottom, though social prestige gives some of these freak sects a borrowed impressiveness in certain local areas. (Letter to Helen V. Sully, October 17, 1933; *Selected Letters*, 4.278)

As to this last, HPL was certainly thinking of the stately Mother Church of Christian Science in his beloved Providence.

ACCOUNTING FOR RELIGION

If Friedrich Schleiermacher described religion as “a sense and taste for the Infinite,” Lovecraft felt there was no accounting for people’s taste! Why did

intelligent people, those above the level of the necessarily credulous herd, continue to believe? It was a kind of “atheist theodicy.” His answers are varied, even as people are varied and complex:

Religion pretends to satisfy by assuming man’s possession of mystic information-channels apart from the senses, but we are outgrowing the possibilities of this benign delusion. Only the subtler illusion of art is left. . . . This illusion we must keep as long as we can, for life without it would be sterile indeed for most of us; yet I do not think we can keep it always. (Letter to Woodburn Harris, February 25–March 1, 1929; *Selected Letters*, 2.302)

Psychology now proves the religious instinct to be a form of transmuted eroticism precisely parallel to the transmutations in other directions which respectively produce such things as sadism, hallucination, melancholia, and other mental morbidities. (Letter to Robert E. Howard, October 4, 1930; *Selected Letters*, 3.175)

The last comment is interesting in light of the confessed “asexual” character of Lovecraft himself and the apparent sexual innocence of his correspondent, Robert E. Howard, creator of Conan the Barbarian, whose womanizing exploits, only hinted at, reflected no experience of Howard’s own. One suspects Lovecraft and Howard sublimated their libido in the horror and violence they wrote about, rather than letting it come to expression in either sexuality or religion:

How about the residual believers of taste, information, and cultivation? I think the causes of their belief are about as follows:

- (a) Habit of tradition rather than thought. Oversensitiveness to abstract principle of authority.
- (b) Wish-thinking—dread of emotional-intellectual consequences of truth.
- (c) Lack of specific information, causing apprehensive belief that good morals and civilization depend upon religion.
- (d) Emotional bias—intense devotion to past cuts off mental processes of investigation.
- (e) Literal rather than inclusively imaginative mind which accepts religious statistics and casuistry before investigating other side. And thus has mind-closing first impression.
- (f) Emotional overdevelopment requiring ritually orgiastic outlet.
- (g) Aesthetic bias—conception of life in terms of art rather than thought. This is the great Catholic-breeder.
- (h) Metaphysical temperament—constitutional addiction to formal scholasticism which induces insensitiveness to facts presented in the spirit of experiment and inductive science. Over-emphasis o[n] the possible import of modern discoveries like relativity and quantum theory.

- (i) Subconscious fear of loss of social position through departure from tradition.
- (j) Idiosyncrasies of temperament, largely hereditary, which help out one's natural wish for order and conservatism by subtly responding to all arguments based on the past and the usual, and subtly remaining insensitive to the opposite side.
- (k) Passionate group-feelings—altruism, brother-saving, justice-enforcing, liquor-banishing, etc., etc., which exaggerate ethics to a point where poetic personification automatically takes place and reason goes by the board.
- (l) Overdeveloped *reverence*—conscious or subconscious—for once potent symbols or for the massed opinions of the believing generations of yesterday and the eminent surviving believers of today. Also—excessive sense of *awe* at magnitude and complexity of the cosmos.
- (m) Extreme introversion with its solemnly proportionless exaltation of intuition and subjective experience at the expense of realistic observation, comparison, and experiment. Naive belief in realities apart from those sensorily apprehended.
- (n) *And most potent of all*—an out-and-out infantile fixation developed by early childhood influences and absolutely shutting off the current of brain-power from areas of religious and philosophical speculation.

(Letter to Frank Belknap Long, February 20, 1929; *Selected Letters*, 2.272)

Schleiermacher defended religion (albeit in a rather abstract form) against the disdain of his sophisticated contemporaries and colleagues. One does not like to be judged a crank by one's peers. So Schleiermacher wrote and delivered his famous *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* in 1799. The above list represents Lovecraft's attempt to account for the cultured believers in religion who ought to know better. And just as Schleiermacher must, at least in part, have been preaching to the mirror in an effort to resolve his own doubts, a comparison of these belief-tendencies with Lovecraft's own occasional autobiographical reflections reveals that he had derived the list at least as much from his own introspections as from observing the mental and emotional habits of others.

LOVECRAFT AND NIETZSCHE

Not surprisingly, Lovecraft associated his cosmicism with the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche: "I have never been able to soothe myself with the sugary delusions of religion; for these things stand convicted of the utmost absurdity in the light of modern scientific knowledge. With Nietzsche, I have been forced to confess that mankind as a whole has no goal or purpose whatsoever, but is a mere superfluous speck in the unfathomable vortices of infinity and eternity" (letter to Reinhart Kleiner, September 14, 1919; *Selected Letters*, 1.86).

Debate continues over Nietzsche's possible anti-Semitism in light of the Nazi appropriation of his work. Lovecraft was certainly a racist and an anti-Semite, though for him it was more a matter (albeit no less pernicious) of broad generalizations in comparative cultures. He was willing to recognize the integrity of all cultures and ethnic traditions—as long as they did not penetrate and corrupt one another. Those who employ such considerations as mitigations of Lovecraft's views fail to discern the racist character of even that apparently mild version. The most one can say about Lovecraft in this regard is that he was happily a hypocrite. His ostensible views appeared to have no effect upon his attitudes toward actual individuals of whatever ethnicity. It apparently did not occur to him to hate specific persons. But in what follows, he sounds uncomfortably close not just to Nietzsche, but even to Himmler, not to mention today's neo-Nazi neopagans (including self-styled Odinists):

Semitism has never done anything save harm us when forced upon us or adopted by accident. It gave us the puling hypocrisies of the Christian doctrine—us, who by every law of Nature are virile, war-like, and beauty-loving pagans and Northern polytheists! We, who should shout our laughter to Odin and Thor, are constrained to bend like Eastern slaves over sickly twilight altars to a crucified consumptive. Faugh! It sickens my blond Teuton soul!! (Letter to Frank Belknap Long, August 21, 1926; *Selected Letters*, 2.67)

Half the tragedies of history are the result of expecting one group to conform to the instinctive reactions of another, or to cherish its values. One of the worst examples of this is the cringing Semitic slave-cult of Christianity which became thrust upon our virile, ebullient Western stock through a series of grotesque historical accidents. (Letter to James F. Morton, October 30, 1929; *Selected Letters*, 3.45)

Christianity cannot be taken seriously. It is naïve & unscientific to blame the world for not conforming to it—since it is a chimerical & poetic illusion to which human nature is utterly alien. It is meaningless—because no race or nation ever could or ought to conform to it. The only blameable thing is the stupid stubbornness with which people have continued to pretend belief in this irrelevant & unworkable Oriental importation. Had it been cast overboard long ago, the Western world would have had all the earlier start toward a rational system of administration based on the actual needs of actual people. (Letter to Elizabeth Toldridge, December 14, 1932; *Selected Letters*, 4.121)

There is, however, a still further spiritual kinship between Lovecraft and Nietzsche. It is instructive to compare two fiction passages from both writers. The first is the well-known madman passage from Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!"—As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around

just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated?—Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

“How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.”

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. “I have come too early,” he said then; “my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves.”

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: “What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?” (181–182)

The second depicts the sudden arrival of old Wizard Whateley, a new and proud grandfather, in Osborne’s Store in Lovecraft’s “The Dunwich Horror”:

There was a hideous screaming which echoed above even the hill noises and the dogs’ barking on the night Wilbur was born, but no known doctor or midwife presided at his coming. Neighbours knew nothing of him till a week afterward, when Old Whateley drove his sleigh through the snow into Dunwich Village and discoursed incoherently to the group of loungers at Osborne’s general store. There seemed to be a change in the old man—an added element of furtiveness

in the clouded brain which subtly transformed him from an object to a subject of fear—though he was not one to be perturbed by any common family event. Amidst it all he showed some trace of the pride later noticed in his daughter, and what he said of the child's paternity was remembered by many of his hearers years afterward.

"I dun't keer what folks think—ef Lavinny's boy looked like his pa, he wouldn't look like nothin' ye expeck. Ye needn't think the only folks is the folks hereabouts. Lavinny's read some, an' has seed some things the most o' ye only tell abaout. I calc'late her man is as good a husban' as ye kin find this side of Aylesbury; an' ef ye knowed as much abaout the hills as I dew, ye wouldn't ast no better church weddin' nor her'n. Let me tell ye suthin—*some day yew folks'll hear a child o' Lavinny's a-callin' its father's name on the top o' Sentinel Hill!*" (*Dunwich Horror*, 160)

The basic image in both passages is the same: A wild-eyed figure descends upon the sleepy town, appearing like an apparition among the ill-prepared loungers to announce a strange and dreadful advent. Though its denouement is yet some time off, all has changed; the world itself has changed, if only one knew it. And soon enough the great fact will be impossible to deny. The day is coming. "And then you'll know!"

What change is that? In Nietzsche's parable it is the death of God: the loss of any central meaning, any North Star of truth. We wander now, with no direction marked out for us by destiny, by the will of God, nor even by Fate. For this the mad prophet uses the striking image of the very earth's becoming unchained from its sun and straying into chartless cosmic gulfs. The very same image occurs later in "The Dunwich Horror" when we learn that the Whateleys hoped to let in beings that would "drag the earth off to some nameless place for some nameless purpose" (*Dunwich Horror*, 198).

There are other parallels, too, like the fact that Nietzsche's madman enters several churches to announce his tidings—just as Wizard Whateley does, since Osborne's Store is located in an abandoned church. Nietzsche's prophet is overcome with amazement that mere human beings have managed to kill God. And what do Dr. Armitage and his Lilliputian colleagues manage to accomplish in Lovecraft's tale? Exactly that! That's the whole point of the story. Mere humans almost manage to destroy the world and are prevented by mere human beings, who destroy a god instead. Just as for Nietzsche, God (in this case, the avatar of Yog-Sothoth) must be destroyed for humanity to rise to its rightful greatness.

Nietzsche's worldview and Lovecraft's are at bottom the same. Lovecraft's was a universe without God or any prescribed purpose to life. The only meaning life has is the meaning we imaginatively impose upon it. This is what Lovecraft meant when he derived ethics from aesthetics rather than from metaphysics. There is no ontological grounding for right and wrong. Being good is simply the most artful, the most pleasing way to live: "It is true that cosmic 'good' & 'evil' do not exist—but it is also true that in human conduct

and emotion-guiding there are certain courses which . . . tend to give profound & lasting satisfaction & expression to a maximum of our faculties, & certain courses which yield a net return (whatever the momentary effect) of dissatisfaction and frustration” (letter to Helen V. Sully, October 17, 1933; *Selected Letters*, 4.284). The nullity of the universe without God, without Truth, is a vast blank canvas on which we may paint any fantasy we like. And that is why Nietzsche called this the “gay science,” the joyous knowledge.

“No change of faith can dull the colours and magic of spring, or dampen the native exuberance of perfect health; and the consolations of taste and intellect are infinite. It is easy to remove the mind from harping on the lost illusion of immortality. The disciplined intellect fears nothing and craves no sugar-plum at the day’s end, but is content to accept life and serve society as best it may. Personally, I should not care for immortality in the least. There is nothing better than oblivion, since in oblivion there is no wish unfulfilled. We had it before we were born, yet did not complain. Shall we then whine because we know it will return? It is Elysium enough for me, at any rate.”

—H. P. Lovecraft, “In Defence of Dagon,” *Collected Essays*, 5.61.

But wasn’t Lovecraft at least a believer in the central rule of reason? As a method, yes. As a source of meaning, no. In fact, for him, it was none other than reason—science—that had disclosed humanity’s precarious and absurd position in the scheme of things. In addition, a careful reading of Lovecraft yields an anxious awareness that reason’s supposed centrality, like humanity’s, is tenuous and finally doomed. A flood of ancient, non-European, and nonrational chaos is about to break forth and subsume the Eurocentric, male-dominated, logocentric cosmos of the West. He bemoaned this influx of “foreigners” every time he walked down the streets of Brooklyn. He fictionalized it in the form of cults of half-castes, mad Arabs, and nautical-looking Negroes.

Lovecraft scholars like to say that HPL used his fictions to convey his philosophy. Yes, that’s right. That’s all anyone does, because as Nietzsche said, we have no truth, only fictions. All our concepts are forgotten metaphors. The word *fiction* implies that something else is truer, is fact. But there is no such alternative. And yet we must continue to use the word *fiction* if only to remind ourselves that we have no truth, no fact, besides our fictions.

AZATHOTH AND THE NUMINOUS

The whole question of Lovecraft’s fundamental attitude toward religion was placed in a new light in Fritz Leiber’s great essay “A Literary Copernicus,” in

which he traced out convincing parallels between Lovecraft's view of humanity as negligible flotsam in the wide universe and Rudolf Otto's sketch of acute "creature-feeling" in his classic *The Idea of the Holy*. Outlining a phenomenology of religious experience across cultures and centuries, Otto described a prerational encounter with the yet-undefined Numinous: the Wholly Other. Our experience with the uncanny Other is twofold. First, we experience holy terror before the *mysterium tremendum* because it is overpowering, provokes awe, and is urgent with living energy. Second, we experience the lure of the *mysterium fascinans*, since the Holy is experienced as both inherently august, or worthy of worship and praise, and subjectively fascinating to us. Thus we are simultaneously attracted and repelled, enthralled and afraid. We feel keenly our own unworthiness and insignificance, not moral shame but ontological deficiency.

Leiber was right: Otto very nearly described Lovecraft's reaction (or the reaction he thought requisite) to the dwarfing spectacle of the abyss of the universe that must devour all memory of man along with the pterodactyls and amoeba and dodo birds that precede him into the void of forgetfulness. There is the overpowering shock that HPL attributed to his doomed and disillusioned protagonists upon realizing their tenuous place in the scheme of things. It is nihilistic dread, the ineluctable knowledge of one's own nullity. And equally there is the irresistible fascination to *know*, to break the chains that confine the five senses and to grasp whatever may lie beyond, no matter at what peril to life or sanity. It is not worship—or is it? Is not Lovecraft's cosmicism a hymn to a Greatness that dwarfs human significance to nothing? There is an indefatigable sense of wonder, which Lovecraft expressed most acutely in his poems:

I never can be tied to raw, new things,
 For I first saw the light in an old town,
 Where from my window huddled roofs sloped down
 To a quaint harbour rich with visionings.
 Streets with carved doorways where the sunset beams
 Flooded old fanlights and small window-panes,
 And Georgian steeples topped with gilded vanes—
 These were the sights that shaped my childhood dreams.

Such treasures, left from times of cautious leaven,
 Cannot but loose the hold of flimsier wraiths
 That flit with shifting ways and muddled faiths
 Across the changeless walls of earth and heaven.
 They cut the moment's thongs and leave me free
 To stand alone before eternity.
 (*Ancient Track*, 76)

There is no theism, no personal God, in all this. It is simply an aesthetic mysticism. Others might even call it religious. But Lovecraft did not.

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H. L. Mencken

S. T. Joshi

In a career as journalist and cultural critic that spanned nearly fifty years, Henry Louis Mencken (1880–1956) waged a relentless battle against religion and its unwarranted incursions into the realms of science, politics, and society. A native and lifelong resident of Baltimore, Mencken received no formal schooling after graduating from high school; instead, he immediately entered journalism, working first as a reporter for the *Baltimore Herald* and then, beginning in 1906, for the *Baltimore Sun*, a paper he helped to raise to international prominence until he was forced to retire for health reasons in 1949. In 1910 he assisted in the founding of the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, and it was for this paper that he did the bulk of his newspaper writing. Mencken also gained celebrity as editor of and voluminous contributor to (mostly in the form of book reviews) the *Smart Set* (1908–1923) and the *American Mercury* (1924–1933).

Because Mencken was almost entirely self-taught, he occasionally gives the impression of a cracker-barrel philosopher, tossing off outrageous or controversial statements in a deliberate attempt to provoke his audience. Mencken's penchant for satire, parody, and whimsy, along with his modified use of what he called the "American language"—a language that eschewed the stodgy dignity of formal English by the use of racy slang, colloquialism, and neologisms—can occasionally make him seem flippant and irreverent and can also make it difficult to ascertain with exactitude the beliefs he himself espoused. Moreover, given that much of his writing on religion (as on other subjects) occurs in the form of newspaper articles written for a specific occasion, his broader views on a number of vital issues pertaining to religion can be difficult to identify. A convenient recent compilation, *H. L. Mencken on Religion*, provides some insight, but we shall have to draw upon a still wider range of his immense output to portray the totality of his opinions on

this subject. Even his later monograph *Treatise on the Gods* offers only fragments of a full answer.

A "THEOLOGICAL MORON"

In a chapter of his autobiography, *Happy Days*, entitled "The Schooling of a Theologian," Mencken wrote entertainingly of his earliest religious training. Although he admitted frankly that his father, August Mencken, was an "infidel" (*H. L. Mencken on Religion* [hereafter MR], 25), August nonetheless enrolled Henry and his brother, Charles, in a Methodist Sunday school—largely (in his son's view) to have peace and quiet on Sunday afternoons for his naps. Mencken's recollections of the Sunday school experience focused largely on the rousing hymns that the boys were forced to learn: His favorite, he declared, was "Are You Ready for the Judgment Day?" "a gay and even rollicking tune with a saving hint of brimstone in the words" (MR, 27). And yet, even though, as biographer Fred Hobson reports, "when Mencken was a child, a family Bible rested on the center table in the parlor, although no one ever opened it" (51), Mencken in later years clearly became intimately familiar with the Bible, even though he would occasionally make curious errors, as when he frequently asserted that Jonah swallowed the whale instead of the whale's swallowing Jonah.

In an essay of 1920 Mencken referred to himself as a "theological moron"—by which he meant, "I have no sense whatever of the divine presence or of a divine personality; neither ever enters into my thinking" (MR, 32). But Mencken was extremely cagey in declaring whether he was an actual atheist. In this essay, "Confessions of a Theological Moron," he stated merely that "I am anything but a militant atheist and haven't the slightest objection to church-going, so long as it is honest" (MR, 32). Does this remark hold out the possibility that Mencken was an atheist of some kind, even if not "militant"? An amusing sketch entitled "Memorial Service" (printed in *Smart Set* in March 1922) lists dozens of gods that human beings have believed in over the millennia, and Mencken added, "The hell of dead gods is as crowded as the Presbyterian hell for babies" (MR, 294). Presumably, the implication is that the current god of the Christians (or the Jews or the Muslims or any other sect of believers) is similarly doomed to oblivion, but Mencken was careful not to make any explicit statement to that effect.

Mencken did not appear to have discounted the possibility of some kind of "force" or "will" in the universe, which might perhaps be equated with a god. In a section of the column "Clinical Notes" entitled "Sabbath Meditations," Mencken was forthright in rejecting atheism:

It seems to me to be plain that atheism, properly so-called, is nonsense, and I can recall no concrete atheist who did not appear to me to be a donkey. To deny any given god is, of course, quite reasonable, but to deny *all* gods is simply folly.

For if there is anything plain about the universe it is that it is governed by law, and if there is anything plain about law it is that it can never be anything but a manifestation of will. Do the stars spin a certain way, and no other? Then it is simply because some will ordains that they shall spin that way, as the will of a juggler ordains that the balls in air shall go in certain paths. If the will failed in the one case the stars would go thundering into one another, just as if it failed in the other case the balls would drop to the stage. (60–61)

This statement is not very impressive as metaphysics, and it does little aside from revealing Mencken's lack of understanding of physics. The poet George Sterling, in a letter, rightly criticized Mencken's "anthropomorphism in asserting that force has to be an application of will," going on to say that "it's the nature of matter to act as it does, and that it cannot act otherwise" (*From Baltimore to Bohemia*, 198).

The essay "What I Believe," printed in 1930, is similarly ambiguous. Although Mencken clearly rejected the very notion of faith ("In my own credo there are few articles of faith; in fact, I have been quite unable, in ten days and nights of prayer and self-examination, to discover a single one" [MR, 37]), he never addressed the issue of the existence of any kind of god. He concluded the essay with the following: "I believe that religion, generally speaking, has been a curse to mankind—that its modest and greatly overestimated services on the ethical side have been more than overborne by the damage it has done to clear and honest thinking" (MR, 47). Even this remark does not necessarily commit Mencken to the view that religious thinking is actually erroneous, although perhaps the implication is there.

A book review of 1932 appears to specify the kind of god Mencken could believe in: "I see no difficulty in believing in a personal God—not, of course, the brummagem police sergeant of the Christian proletariat, but a hard-working, honest and not too intelligent Overseer of our miserable rat-hole in the cosmos, beset heavily day and night by the arbitrary and ill-natured mandates of gods still higher" (MR, 245). If this remark is to be taken at all seriously, it suggests Mencken's belief in a god (one among many) who is not omnipotent. It is possible that Mencken actually believed in such a god, although a much earlier essay—"The Anthropomorphic Delusion," which appeared in *Smart Set* in August 1919—treats the notion with considerable humor. Relating the many imperfections of the human body and mind ("No other animal is so defectively adapted to its environment" [MR, 56]), Mencken lampooned the idea that we are made in God's image: "If we assume that man actually does resemble God, then we are forced into the impossible theory that God is a coward, an idiot and a bounder" (MR, 57). In the essay "Hint to Theologians" from the *American Mercury* of January 1924, Mencken asserted that the notion of a multiplicity of gods is logically superior to that of a single god:

The theory that the universe is run by a single God must be abandoned, and . . . in place of it we must set up the theory that it is actually run by a board of gods, all of equal puissance and authority. Once this concept is grasped all the difficulties

that have vexed theologians vanish. Human experience instantly lights up the whole dark scene. We observe in everyday life what happens when authority is divided, and great decisions are reached by consultation and compromise. We know that the effects, at times, particularly when one of the consultants runs away with the others, are very good, but we also know that they are usually extremely bad. Such a mixture of good and bad is on display in the cosmos. It presents a series of brilliant successes in the midst of an infinity of bungling failures. (MR, 66)

But the general tone of this essay suggests satire—in particular, a satire aimed at one of Mencken’s perennial *bêtes noires*, government.

In “What I Believe” Mencken expressed doubt about another central religious issue: the immortality of the soul. He said plainly, “I believe that the evidence for immortality is no better than the evidence for witches, and deserves no more respect” (MR, 47). In a brief contribution to Jacob Helder’s *Greatest Thoughts on Immortality*, Mencken easily destroyed several of the standard arguments in support of immortality—for example, the argument that it is a universal human desire and therefore true (“That desire is by no means universal. I lack it, and so do many other men” [MR, 48–49])—and concluded: “It is my hope, as it is my belief, that death is the end” (MR, 49). The book review of 1932 is more forthright on the subject (“When it comes to the immortality of the soul, I can only say that it seems to me to be wholly incredible and preposterous” [MR, 246]); in fact, Mencken went farther, relying on science to cast doubt on the very existence of the soul, or at least to point to some fatal paradoxes in the conception:

Its proponents get into serious difficulties when they undertake to say when and how the soul gets into the body, and where it comes from. Must it be specially created in each instance, or is it the offspring of the two parent souls? In either case, when does it appear, at the moment of conception or somewhat later? If the former, then what happens to the soul of a zygote cast out, say, an hour after fertilization? If the death of that soul ensues, then the soul is not immortal in all cases, which means that its immortality can be certain in none; and if, on the contrary, it goes to Heaven or Hell, or some vague realm between, then we are asked to believe that the bishops and archbishops who swarm beyond the grave are forced to associate, and on terms of equality, with shapes that can neither think nor speak, and resemble tadpoles far more than they resemble Christians. (MR, 246–247)

RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND BELIEF

Given his own skepticism, Mencken was repeatedly forced to address the issue of why, after so many centuries and so many scientific advances that appeared to refute its central claims, religion continued to exercise a tenacious

hold upon the majority of the human—and, specifically, the American—populace. He was, indeed, forthright in maintaining that science had, in fact, overthrown many of the central tenets of the Christian religion. Asserting, in the essay “The Ascent of Man” (appearing in *Smart Set* in May 1923), that religion “belongs exclusively to a very early stage of human development” (MR, 61), Mencken saw it as a sign of human progress that religion was gradually shed with the advance of intellect and civilization.

Inspired by his reading of Andrew D. White’s *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896), which he once pronounced a “noble” work (MR, 46), Mencken felt that there was a war to the death between religion and science, and that science must prevail if society was to become fit for civilized people to live in. “There is . . . no possibility of reconciling science and religion—that is, religion of the sort preached to the peasantry by [William Jennings] Bryan” (MR, 225), he wrote in 1925, shortly after the conclusion of the Scopes trial. If this comment suggests that Mencken’s target was merely the fundamentalists, who believed in the literal truth of every word of the Bible, even though it is full of internal contradictions as well as statements that are plainly false in the light of current scientific knowledge, it must be noted that Mencken believed that *all* Christians, whatever their denomination and however they tried to brush certain embarrassing features of the Bible under the rug, were obliged to be at one with the fundamentalists on this point. Agreeing with the theologian J. Gresham Machen—who, in *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) and other works, soundly refuted the claims of the modernists, who attempted to discard miracles and other supernatural elements from the Bible—Mencken derided the notion that one could pick and choose what one wished to believe in the Bible:

Is Christianity actually a revealed religion? If not, then it is nothing; if so, then we must accept the Bible as an inspired statement of its principles. But how can we think of the Bible as inspired and at the same time as fallible? How can we imagine it as part divine and awful truth and part mere literary confectionary? And how, if we manage so to imagine it, are we to distinguish between the truth and the confectionary? (“The Impregnable Rock,” *American Mercury*, December 1931; MR, 136)

In reviewing Montague Summers’s *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* (1927), Mencken noted with bemusement that Summers accepted the notorious statement in Exodus (22:18) “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” going on to say, “He can’t imagine a Christian who refuses to believe in demoniacal possession, and no more can I” (MR, 239). After all, the statement in Exodus comes right from the mouth of God, and there are any number of passages in which Jesus acknowledges a belief in demons (as when he expels demons from two individuals and thrusts them into the bodies of the Gadarene swine). If the Bible is an inspired document, these statements must be accepted; if they are not accepted, one has tacitly acknowledged that the Bible

is not inspired and is therefore of no more value as a guide to belief and conduct than any other treatise, scriptural or secular.

Why, then, in light of these plain facts, do the vast majority of people continue to believe? Mencken was blunt on the issue: They are stupid. In “The Black Art,” published in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* on March 6, 1922, he noted that the overwhelming number of Americans are superstitious in one way or the other: “The truth is that freedom from such superstitions, like the capacity for truth and honor, is the exclusive possession of a very small minority of the human race—even in America, a country where education is free and universal, probably not more than one tenth of one per cent.” (MR, 59). Led by his early readings in Nietzsche—one of his earliest treatises was *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1908)—Mencken believed that all the advances of civilization were the product of a select few exceptional individuals who had dragged the rest of the mob along in their wake.

“Religion was invented by man just as agriculture and the wheel were invented by man, and there is absolutely nothing in it to justify the belief that its inventors had the aid of higher powers, whether on this earth or elsewhere. It is, in some of its aspects, extremely ingenious and in others it is movingly beautiful, but in yet others it is so absurd that it comes close to imbecility. What the faithful Christian professes to believe, if put into the form of an affidavit, would be such shocking nonsense that even bishops and archbishops would laugh at it.”

—H. L. Mencken, *Treatise on the Gods*. vi–vii

“Fundamentalism: Divine and Secular,” from the *Chicago Sunday Tribune* of September 20, 1925, opens resoundingly with the statement “*Homo boobiens* is a fundamentalist for the precise reason that he is uneducable” (MR, 120). Note the exact wording of the passage: Mencken was saying not that human beings are *uneducated*, but that they are *uneducable*. In other words, no amount of education will ever be able to lift them from their slough of ignorance; scientific advance has progressed to such a degree that only experts in the chosen field can now understand it, and the mob simply rejects what it cannot understand:

The clodhopper’s objection to the hypothesis of evolution is not primarily that it is heathenish; that, indeed, is only an afterthought. His primary objection is that it is complicated and unintelligible—in the late Martyr Bryan’s phase, that it is “stuff and nonsense.” In order to understand it a man must have a sound grounding in all the natural sciences; he must bring to the business an immense and intricate knowledge. And in order to get that grounding he must have a mind capable of taking it in. (MR, 121)

The account of creation in Genesis, on the other hand, even though it is “incredible” and “counter to the known facts,” is “divinely simple” (MR, 120).

Mencken relentlessly drove home this connection between theology and ignorance. In “The Ghostly Fraternity” from the *American Mercury* of June 1924, he denied that the average clergyman was even particularly religious; in fact, his chief motivation was to “shine in the world without too much effort. The young theologian, in brief, is commonly an ambitious but somewhat lazy and incompetent fellow, and he studies theology instead of medicine or law because it offers a quicker and easier route to an assured job and public respect” (MR, 68). Mencken similarly denied that the Jesuits were a class of notably intelligent religious scholars. In “Shock Troops,” a review of E. Boyd Barrett’s *The Jesuit Enigma* that appeared in the *American Mercury* in January 1928, he refuted Barrett’s notion that the Jesuits were “a sort of intellectual aristocracy within the Church,” claiming instead, “It is, I believe, nothing of the sort. Founded by a soldier, it remains essentially military, not scholarly. Its aim is not to find out what is true, but to defend and propagate what Holy Church says is true. All the ideas that it is officially aware of are fixed ideas: it knows of no machinery for changing them, and wants to hear of none” (MR, 108). As for Catholicism as a whole, “The church, as a church, like any other ecclesiastical organization, is highly unintelligent. It is forever making thumping errors, both in psychology and in politics, and despite its occasional brilliant successes among sentimental pseudo-intellectuals . . . it seems destined to go downhill hereafter” (“The I.Q. of Holy Church,” *American Mercury*, September 1930; MR, 109).

But Mencken did have to face the plain fact that some people of apparent intelligence were nonetheless believers. His review of Howard A. Kelly’s *A Scientific Man and the Bible* (1926) betrays amazement that a founding member of the Johns Hopkins Medical School, and a man whom Mencken had known for many years, could nonetheless maintain a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. He pondered the matter:

By what route do otherwise sane men come to believe such palpable nonsense? How is it possible for a human brain to be divided into two insulated halves, one functioning normally, naturally and even brilliantly, and the other capable only of the ghastly balderdash which issues from the minds of Baptist evangelists? . . . Why should this be so? What is there in religion that completely flabbergasts the wits of those who believe in it? (“Fides ante Intellectum,” *American Mercury*, February 1926; MR, 230)

Mencken could provide no answer to these queries. The best he could do is to appeal, as he did frequently, to the splendid prose-poetry of the Bible. Mencken stated unhesitatingly, “To this day no better poetry has ever been written. It is so powerful in its effects that even men who reject its content in toto are more or less susceptible to it” (MR, 64). Poetry, too, is a heritage of the infancy of

the human race as a whole and of the youth of individual human beings; and the poetry that is imbedded in the entire Christian story—both on the level of language and on the level of the overall narrative—will ensure its survival: “Christianity will survive because it appeals to the sense of poetry—to what, in men of arrested development, which is to say, average men, passes for the instinct to seek and know beauty” (MR, 65).

RELIGION AND POLITICS

Mencken’s forays into the metaphysics of religion were relatively few. As a practicing journalist, he was much more interested in the intrusion of individual religions, or individual religious figures, into realms where he felt they did not belong; chief among them was politics. He was well aware that, in spite of the First Amendment, the United States, “save for a short while in its infancy, while the primal infidels survived, has always diluted democracy with theocracy” (“Editorial,” *American Mercury*, October 1928; MR, 253). And because this country is “a realm of faith,” therefore “religious questions belong properly to its public life” (MR, 255). This may be a surprising conclusion from one who felt that the Christian religion in particular was factually wrong on so many metaphysical, moral, and political issues, but Mencken knew that given the importance of religion in the minds of so many Americans, there was no way to banish it from the public sphere.

Politically, Mencken was what he himself termed an extreme libertarian. In a book review column of 1922 he wrote:

As for me, my literary theory, like my politics, is based chiefly upon one main idea, to wit, the idea of freedom. I am, in brief, a libertarian of the most extreme variety, and know of no human right that is one-tenth as valuable as the simple right to utter what seems (at the moment) to be the truth. Take away this right, and none other is worth a hoot; nor, indeed, can any other long exist. (“The Monthly Feuilleton,” 140)

This stance led him to protest strenuously against any attempts by the religious to force their beliefs—and, even more significantly, their behavior—upon the rest of the populace. In his day, Mencken found two cases where this was done: the Sunday laws and Prohibition.

In spite of the purported separation of church and state decreed by the First Amendment, a wide array of Sunday laws were on the books in many states, and Mencken was well aware that such groups as the Lord’s Day Alliance—a Canadian-American organization that sought to pressure state legislatures into passing still more restrictive laws, outlawing such activities as playing baseball, going to a movie, or even driving a car on Sunday—were vigilantly pushing their agenda. He noted tartly that in the state of Maryland in 1913,

a symphony orchestra could not charge money for a concert held on Sunday: “The Blue Laws were passed in 1723, and go back to the hell fire harangues of Cotton Mather, but every effort to mitigate and modernize them is opposed with truly savage violence. Under them, the impresario who had an orchestra play the nine symphonies of Beethoven on nine successive Sunday afternoons would be liable to a minimum fine of \$25,550 and 220 days in jail” (“Good Old Baltimore,” *Smart Set*, May 1913; *Mencken’s America*, 77). In “The Free Lance”—a column he wrote for the *Baltimore Evening Sun* six days a week for four and a half years (1911–1915)—Mencken tirelessly advocated the repeal of these archaic statutes. He ultimately prevailed, but only after many years. In a much later essay, “On Sunday Laws,” which appeared in *Baltimore Evening Sun* on March 21, 1932, Mencken summed up the issue. He had no objection to a “day of rest” when those who wished to attend church could do so without hindrance, but he maintained that the law must protect others as well:

The man outside the church has rights as well as the man within. He, also, deserves to be protected in his lawful occasions. If what he wants to do is innocent in itself, and invades no other man’s rights, and has no baleful effect upon the general welfare, and is supported by a preponderance of public opinion, then any law which prohibits it is a tyrannical and evil law, and ought to be repealed. And if the animus behind that law . . . is purely theological—if its actual purpose is not the general good, but simply the furthering of some fantastic and oppressive religious idea, cherished only by an obscure and anti-social sect—then it becomes utterly and intolerably abominable, and should be got rid of as soon as possible. (*MR*, 265–266)

The most “fantastic and oppressive religious idea” that Mencken could imagine was the idea that the consumption of alcohol should be prohibited by statute. Ever since the early 1910s, Mencken—one of this nation’s great devotees of beer and other alcoholic beverages—had been ominously predicting the ultimate passage of a Prohibition amendment, and he saw it come to pass in 1919. One of his most controversial stances on the issue of religion and politics was his assertion that certain religious denominations—specifically the Methodist and the Baptist—were behind the movement to pass the amendment. The matter is too complex for detailed treatment here, but the historical evidence suggests that Mencken was pretty much on target in this claim. The central role of the Anti-Saloon League in advocating Prohibition, from as early as the 1890s, is not in doubt; nor is there any doubt of its fundamentally religious character and basis. F. Scott McBride, general superintendent of the league, stated, “The Anti-Saloon League was born of God. It has been led by Him, and will fight on while He leads” (quoted in *MR*, 19–20). It was clearly the Baptist and Methodist Churches as a whole, and not merely individual members of them acting independently, who formed the core of the Anti-Saloon League and engaged in political pressure upon legislators to pass the Prohibition

amendment. While it is true that Prohibition was in part a reaction by Anglo-Saxon Americans against what they perceived to be the excessive imbibings of recent European immigrants, there was always a subtle anti-Catholic bias mixed with this xenophobic prejudice—a bias that emerged openly with the nomination in 1928 of the “wet” Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith, the first Catholic nominated by any major American party for the presidency.

Mencken expressed particular disdain for Bishop James Cannon, perhaps the leading Methodist clergyman of his time. He was a vigorous proponent of temperance, being the leading lobbyist for the Anti-Saloon League both before and after the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment. When Herbert Hoover was elected in 1928, Mencken asserted that for all practical purposes, the First Amendment had been abrogated:

Whether for good or for ill, the old sharp separation of church and state has been definitely abandoned. The Eighteenth Amendment was fastened upon the Constitution, not as a political measure and by political devices, nor even as a moral measure and by moral devices, but as an almost purely theological measure and by devices borrowed from the camp-meeting. Its adoption was advocated and obtained, not by lawyers or sociologists or professors of political science, but by the embattled Christians of the more bucolic sects, functioning as such. And it is supported to-day by the same naïve sectarians, not on logical grounds, but on strictly dogmatic grounds—in other words, as an article of faith. (“Overture to a Melodrama,” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, January 28, 1929; *MR*, 258)

And yet Mencken must have known by this time that Prohibition was immensely unpopular throughout the nation: It was probably the most widely disobeyed law in American history. Four years later things looked very different, and Mencken chuckled at Cannon’s expense when both political parties inserted a “wet” plank in their platform, making it inevitable that Prohibition would eventually be repealed.

On occasion, Mencken’s devotion to personal liberty led him into awkward stances. Consider his opinion in regard to Christian Science. Although he acknowledged that “the idea behind it is one of the few human ideas in which I can find no sense or logic whatever,” and that “it is not merely erroneous; it is imbecile” (“On Christian Science,” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, October 23, 1916; *MR*, 146), he was nonetheless opposed to laws that prohibited the withholding of orthodox medicine from the children of Christian Scientists. In maintaining that such laws would prevent the spread of infection throughout the community, Mencken merely threw up his hands and remarked that “such risks . . . constitute, in truth, the irremovable hazards that life under civilization imposes upon all of us” (*MR*, 146). As to the harm to the children themselves, Mencken first stated that in fact the majority of them didn’t suffer very much, and those who did—and actually died in the process—merely rid the world of incompetents. This essay proceeds from one fallacy and

absurdity to the next. Mencken was chiefly concerned about a slippery-slope effect: "If they [the Christian Scientists] were jailed to-morrow for believing in Christian Science, I should probably be jailed the next day for refusing to believe in something still sillier" (MR, 150). But the law was not a law against belief; it was a law against child endangerment.

On another sociopolitical issue—divorce—Mencken was firmly on the side of secularism. In the fiery essay "What Is to Be Done about Divorce?" in the *New York World Magazine* on January 26, 1930, he stated bluntly, "I see no chance of dealing with the divorce question rationally until the discussion is purged of religious consideration" (MR, 281). It was the Christian religion that had made divorce nearly impossible in many states, for the Christian view of marriage was inherently unwholesome:

A wife is primarily a sexual instrument and as such must not flinch her lowly duty. If she tries to avoid having children, then she is doomed to hell. If she finds her husband growing unpleasant and turns from him to another, then she is doomed to hell again. As for him, he is bound in the same way and under the same penalties. Both would be better off if they were chaste, but as long as that is impossible they must be unchaste only with each other, and accept with resignation all the more painful consequences, whether biological or theological. (MR, 281)

The whole issue of marriage and divorce could only be addressed by a frank appraisal of facts, "uncontaminated by false assumptions and antediluvian traditions" (MR, 282).

One other sociopolitical issue that Mencken occasionally broached was the role of religion among African-Americans. Mencken—who, in spite of certain politically incorrect usages in his diary and elsewhere, was a true friend of African-Americans, tirelessly supporting their efforts at social and political equality and vigorously promoting the work of black authors—was so incensed by the practice of lynching, especially in his own state, that in 1935 he testified before Congress in support of the Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill. Early in his career he wrote an amusing and strikingly prescient essay urging African-Americans to convert en masse to Islam as a way of battling the Ku Klux Klan in the South. In a 1923 article Mencken shrewdly recognized that slave owners had forced their slaves to convert to Christianity as a means of keeping them in a suitable attitude of humility, but Islam "teaches them to rise and resist—more, to take the offensive against their enemies" (MR, 271). Only seven years later, Wallace Fard and Elijah Muhammad founded the Nation of Islam for very much this same purpose, although the group would not come to prominence until the 1950s.

Although, in "Treason in the Tabernacle," which appeared in the *American Mercury* on June 1931, Mencken wrote optimistically, "One of the cheering signs of the times is the appearance of an anti-clerical movement among Americans of dark complexion" (MR, 283), he must have known that religious

belief was generally stronger among African-Americans than among Caucasians in the United States. Only a few months earlier, in the essay “The Burden of Credulity,” in *Opportunity* of February 1931, Mencken strongly urged people of color to abandon Christianity—at any rate, the kind of Christianity they had largely espoused—if they wished to improve their lot. Responding to the claim by a Baptist clergyman that “among all the Negro Baptists in America, there was not one who was not a Fundamentalist,” Mencken replied pungently, “It is a shameful thing to say of any people who aspire to advance in the world” (*Mencken’s America*, 142).

Mencken’s most controversial claim on this subject was that the Ku Klux Klan itself was, like Prohibition, a Methodist-Baptist creation. Here he was on somewhat shakier ground. For the first decade or two of the Klan’s existence after its reconstitution in 1915, its chief foes were not African-Americans or Jews but Catholics, who were seen as symbols of the social changes (including the influx of “foreigners” and an increase in perceived immorality) that were affecting the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century. Individual Klansmen, and even some Klan leaders, were indeed associated with the Baptist and Methodist Churches, but there was no concerted support of the Klan by any church. Kenneth Turner Jackson, historian of the Klan, wrote:

Although there was no formal connection between the Invisible Empire and any religious denomination, Fundamentalism was the central thread of the Klan program. Declaring that “America is Protestant and so it must remain,” the KKK glorified the “old-time religion,” rejected evolution and higher criticism, and admonished its members to attend church regularly. Protestant clergymen were reminded that Klansmen accepted the Bible as the literal and unalterable word of God. As proof of their devotion, masked Knights frequently appeared unannounced before quiescent congregations for the purpose of making a well-publicized donation. (18)

Jackson went on to point to the Klan’s role in supporting Prohibition and other conservative social and moral causes.

THE SCOPES TRIAL

The event that gained Mencken the greatest celebrity—and, in the eyes of some, notoriety and even infamy—as a religious commentator was his participation as a reporter in the trial of John Thomas Scopes for teaching evolution in a public school in Dayton, Tennessee, in defiance of a recently passed prohibitory statute. This event, which galvanized the nation because of its intertwining of religion, science, politics, and law, catapulted all parties—on the one side, the hapless teacher Scopes; the lead defense attorney, Clarence Darrow; and Mencken as an obviously partisan commentator; and, on the

other side, the former secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan, who had become a leader of the Christian fundamentalist movement—into unwonted celebrity during the two weeks of the trial in the sweltering summer of 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee. This trial later led Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee to write the play *Inherit the Wind* (1955), made into a film in 1960 in which a character clearly based on Mencken was portrayed, rather inappositely, by Gene Kelly.

An important point about Mencken's involvement in the Scopes trial must be understood. He and his allies (Darrow and his assistants, Dudley Field Malone and Arthur Garfield Hays of the American Civil Liberties Union) actually hoped to lose the case to embarrass the entire state of Tennessee and to send the case on appeal to a federal court; Mencken gave the strategy away when he stated in one of his earliest reports from Dayton, "The real trial, in truth, will not begin until Scopes is convicted and ordered to the hulks. Then the prisoner will be the Legislature of Tennessee" (*MR*, 175). The plan did not quite work out as they had hoped: Although Scopes was, in fact, found guilty, the sentence was later overturned by the Tennessee Supreme Court; a few years later, the antievolution statute was quietly repealed by the state legislature. But the publicity surrounding the trial—chiefly fueled by Mencken's partisan "reporting"—had its chosen effect of making the entire state of Tennessee, as well as the entire Christian Fundamentalist movement, a laughingstock throughout the nation and the world, with the result that Fundamentalists retreated into relative obscurity until 1978, when the founding of the Moral Majority reintroduced them as a force in American society and politics.

The choice of Clarence Darrow (1857–1938) was by no means an accident. Not only had he become America's most celebrated defense attorney through a succession of widely publicized cases—notably the Leopold and Loeb case of the previous year, where his eloquence had saved the two upper-class murderers from the gallows—but he had long been known as a fierce opponent of religious tyranny. Two years after the trial, in reviewing Maynard Shipley's *The War on Modern Science* (1927), Darrow wrote of the "onslaught against science" waged by the Fundamentalists, which "shows how completely an active, aggressive and ignorant body, when organized and moved by fanaticism, can influence the world" (*Closing Arguments*, 23). The next year, Darrow wrote a fiery paper, "The Lord's Day Alliance," attacking the lobbying group for its campaign to enforce Sunday laws; the article was so incendiary that Mencken himself rejected it for the *American Mercury*, and it appeared in the radical journal *Plain Talk*. In 1929 Darrow compiled the anthology *Infidels and Heretics: An Agnostic's Anthology*. He was also a frequent participant in public debates in which he argued with theologians on such issues as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and other key issues.

Mencken's reporting of the Scopes trial revisits many of the points he had made against religion in his earlier writing. He was particularly forceful in

noting that there could be no “reconciling” of science and religion when it came to scientific discovery:

For the two parties, it must be manifest, are at the farthestmost poles of difference, and leaning out into space. If one of them is right at all, then the other is wrong altogether. There can be no honest compromise between them. Either Genesis embodies a mathematically accurate statement of what took place during the week of June 3, 4004 B.C. or Genesis is not actually the Word of God. If the former alternative be accepted, then all of modern science is nonsense; if the latter, then evangelical Christianity is nonsense. (MR, 161–162)

Mencken’s attack here, as elsewhere, was on those who sought to downplay the “warfare” between science and theology—who included, to his dismay, even such notable scientists as Robert A. Millikan (winner of the Nobel Prize for physics in 1923) and Henry Fairfield Osborn, paleontologist and longtime president of the American Museum of Natural History. Mencken would later declare that the only result of the work of these “reconcilers” was “to abandon a just cause to its enemies, cravenly and without excuse” (“Counter Offensive,” *American Mercury*, May 1926; MR, 233).

Mencken repeated his assertions that the reason for the refusal of many individuals to accept evolution and other scientific discoveries was that they were fundamentally stupid (“The great masses of men, even in this inspired republic, are precisely where the mob was at the dawn of history. They are ignorant, they are dishonest, they are cowardly, they are ignoble” [MR, 165]), and that science had now become too complex for them to understand (“It puts an unbearable burden upon [their] meager capacity for taking in ideas” [MR, 167]). Mencken also attempted to lay the groundwork for the hoped-for conviction of Scopes by declaring repeatedly that in this community, there was not the remotest possibility that someone like Scopes could get a fair trial. Everyone was a Fundamentalist, and even a “Northern Methodist would be regarded as virtually an atheist” (MR, 178). As for Darrow:

The whisper that he is an atheist has been stilled by the bucolic make-up and by the public report that he has the gift of prophecy and can reconcile Genesis and evolution. Even so, there is ample space about him when he navigates the streets. The other day a newspaper woman was warned by her landlady to keep out of the courtroom when he was on his legs. All the local sorcerers predict that a bolt from heaven will fetch him in the end. (MR, 181–182)

One of Mencken’s most engaging articles is a lengthy report on a Holy Roller revival meeting, held in a farmer’s field. “It is not enough,” Mencken noted, “to go to a revival once a year or twice a year; there must be a revival every night” (MR, 182–183). His account drips with sarcasm for the raving revival leaders and attendees, most of them poor, ignorant yokels for whom the event was the only kind of entertainment to enliven their dreary lives. And yet his reportorial skills were sharp and precise:

From the squirming and jabbering mass a young woman gradually detached herself—a woman not uncomely, with a pathetic home-made cap on her head. Her head jerked back, the veins of her neck swelled, and her fists went to her throat as if she were fighting for breath. She bent backward until she was like half of a hoop. Then she suddenly snapped forward. We caught a flash of the whites of her eyes. Presently her whole body began to be convulsed—great convulsions that began at the shoulders and ended at the hips. She would leap to her feet, thrust her arms in air and then hurl herself upon the heap. Her praying flattened out into a mere delirious caterwauling, like that of a tomcat on a petting party. (MR, 185)

"Mencken's taste for the buffooneries of religion was boundless. In 1916 he attended several of the revival meetings held by the flamboyant evangelist Billy Sunday, in the company of 'sinful veterans, and white-faced shop girls, and quaking Sunday school teachers, and staggered fat women.'"

—MR, 118

"As for Sunday himself, he appeared as nothing more than 'an astounding and benumbing noise, a riot of unearthly sound, an ear-torturing cacophony.'"

—MR, 119

"In 1926, on a visit to Los Angeles, Mencken made a point of visiting the lovely evangelist Aimée Semple McPherson but found nothing of note in her sermon: 'It was the time-honored evangelical hokum, made a bit more raucous than usual by the loudspeakers strewn all over the hall.'"

—MR, 129

The trial's outcome was, indeed, a foregone conclusion, especially when the presiding judge, John Tate Raulston, declared inadmissible the testimony of expert witnesses—chiefly an array of prominent biologists—who would acknowledge the high probability of the truth of evolution. Nevertheless, Mencken was present when Bryan, during a speech to the court, declared that man was not a mammal: "It seemed a sheer impossibility that any literate man should stand up in public and discharge any such nonsense. Yet the poor old fellow did it" (MR, 199).

Mencken was in Dayton for only about ten days, arriving a few days before the trial and leaving after the trial was only half over. He therefore missed the most riveting moment of the proceedings, when Darrow, his other options stymied, made the bold move to put Bryan himself on the stand and cross-examine him. Bryan foolishly agreed, thinking that he could outwit the clever defense attorney, and his clumsy attempts to defend the Bible as a textbook of science were so disastrous that in spite of the actual verdict against Scopes, Bryan's cause suffered a fatal setback. Matters were not helped by the fact that Bryan died a few days after the trial was over.

This stunning turn of events, according to Mencken, shook Bryan's supporters more than anything else in the entire case. Just a week earlier, Mencken had predicted that Fundamentalism, led by Bryan, would seek new worlds to conquer: The trial "serves notice on the country that Neandertal man is organizing in these forlorn backwaters of the land, led by a fanatic, devoid of sense and devoid of conscience" (MR, 203). But Bryan's death took the Fundamentalists aback in more ways than one:

The circumstances of Bryan's death, indeed, have probably done great damage to Fundamentalism, for it is nothing if it is not a superstition, and the rustic pastors will have a hard time explaining to the faithful why the agent of God was struck down in the midst of his first battle. How is it that Darrow escaped and Bryan fell? There is, no doubt, a sound theological reason, but I shouldn't like to have to expound it, even to a country Bible class. In the end, perhaps, the true believers will have to take refuge from the torment of doubt in the theory that the hero was murdered, say by the Jesuits. Even so, there will be the obvious and disquieting inference that, in the first battle, the devil really won. (MR, 212–213)

Mencken wrote a total of four articles on Bryan immediately following his death: "Bryan," in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* on July 27, 1925; "Round Two," in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* on August 10, 1925; an editorial in the *American Mercury* of October 1925; and a fusion of these three pieces, "In Memoriam: W. J. B.," published in *Prejudices: Fifth Series* (1926). To say that Mencken was a bit uncharitable to his late opponent would be an understatement: Even in his own day the ferocity of these articles was deprecated, and even so sympathetic a figure as the science writer L. Sprague de Camp, in his book *The Great Monkey Trial*, wrote, "Mencken succeeded in being even more unjust to Bryan than Bryan had been to Darrow in his post-trial statement. He also succeeded in shocking Bryan's admirers as severely as if he had literally scalped Bryan's corpse and done a war dance around it, waving his bloody trophy" (441).

Even though Mencken incredibly remarked, "It is the national custom to sentimentalize the dead, as it is to sentimentalize men about to be hanged. Perhaps I fall into that weakness here" (MR, 210), he went on to deliver a scathing indictment of Bryan and all he stood for:

Bryan was a vulgar and common man, a cad undiluted. He was ignorant, bigoted, self-seeking, blatant and dishonest. His career brought him into contact with the first men of his time; he preferred the company of rustic ignoramuses. It was hard to believe, watching him at Dayton, that he had traveled, that he had been received in civilized societies, that he had been a high officer of state. He seemed only a poor clod like those around him, deluded by a childish theology, full of an almost pathological hatred of all learning, all human dignity, all beauty, all fine and noble things. He was a peasant come home to the dung-pile. Imagine a gentleman, and you have imagined everything that he was not. (MR, 211)

Outrageous as this statement sounds, is it, in fact, unfair? Some recent commentators on the Scopes trial have found more merit in Bryan's side than Mencken did. Edward J. Larson, in a book on the Scopes trial that is far more sympathetic to Bryan than other studies, maintained that Bryan was also concerned about the ramifications of Darwinism in the social and political sphere—specifically, the perversion of the theory of evolution that came to be called Social Darwinism. In a 1921 lecture, "The Menace of Darwinism," Bryan declared, "To destroy the faith of Christians and lay the foundations for the bloodiest war in history would seem enough to condemn Darwinism" (Larson, 41–42). But Mencken, although himself somewhat inclined toward social Darwinism (based upon his own misreading of Nietzsche's concept of the superman), never brought this facet of his thought to bear in his criticisms of Bryan, which rested entirely on Bryan's dogmatic assertion of biblical literalism.

Mencken, for his part, presciently noted that Fundamentalism, in spite of the catastrophic setback it had suffered in the trial and its aftermath, was by no means finished. Even though, in the wake of the trial, the state of Georgia shelved an antievolution statute it had been considering, Mencken was not entirely sanguine that his side would prevail. The Fundamentalists were everywhere:

They swarm in the country towns, inflamed by their pastors, and with a saint, now, to venerate. They are thick in the mean streets behind the gas-works. They are everywhere that learning is too heavy a burden for mortal minds, even the vague, pathetic learning on tap in little red schoolhouses. They march with the Klan, with the Christian Endeavor Society, with the Junior Order of United American Mechanics, with the Epworth League, with all the roroco bands that poor and unhappy folk organize to bring some light of purpose into their lives. They have had a thrill, and they are ready for more. (MR, 222–223)

Mencken, like Darrow, urged scientists to step to the forefront of the battle and defend their discipline for the good of civilization.

Mencken was also outspoken about the need to debate religious issues in public. Religious views should not be given a free pass merely because they were religious; the failure to examine such views with critical scrutiny was merely a holdover from a prior era when opposition to religion by "heretics" or "infidels" could be punished by the civil authorities. In the essay "Aftermath," appearing in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* on September 24, 1925, Mencken wrote firmly on the matter:

Even a superstitious man has certain inalienable rights. He has a right to harbor and indulge his imbecilities as long as he pleases, provided only he does not try to inflict them upon other men by force. He has a right to argue for them as eloquently as he can, in season and out of season. He has a right to teach them to his children. But certainly he has no right to be protected against the free

criticism of those who do not hold them. He has no right to demand that they be treated as sacred. He has no right to preach them without challenge. . . .

The meaning of religious freedom, I fear, is sometimes greatly misapprehended. It is taken to be a sort of immunity, not merely from governmental control but also from public opinion. A dunderhead gets himself a long-tailed coat, rises behind the sacred desk and emits such bilge as would gag a Hottentot. Is it to pass unchallenged? If so, then what we have is not religious freedom at all, but the most intolerable and outrageous variety of religious despotism. Any fool, once he is admitted to holy orders, becomes infallible. Any half-wit, by the simple device of ascribing his delusions to revelation, takes on an authority that is denied to all the rest of us. (MR, 216)

MENCKEN'S *TREATISE*

Five years after the Scopes trial, Mencken published *Treatise on the Gods*. Lengthy and substantial as it is, in some ways the book does not represent Mencken to best advantage. Although purporting to be a sober, scholarly examination of the anthropology of religion, the work is repeatedly marred both by reliance on poor source material, such as popular works by A. Hyatt Verrill and Lewis Spence, and by inapposite humor ("The Patagonian place of the dead was a vast series of caverns underground, and its chief delight was getting drunk" [155]). Mencken somewhat routinely outlined both the essence of religion ("Its single function is to give man access to the powers which seem to control his destiny, and its single purpose is to induce those powers to be friendly to him" [4]) and its evolution over the millennia. He devoted considerable space to Christianity, noting how the New Testament in particular is riddled with inconsistencies relating to the life and teachings of Jesus, while the Pentateuch "reeks with irreconcilable contradictions and patent imbecilities" (193). As elsewhere, he asserted that the King James Bible "is probably the most beautiful piece of writing in all the literature of the world" (205).

In 1946 Mencken produced a revised edition in which he extensively rewrote Chapter 5 ("Its State Today"). It is here that Mencken laid out his most severe condemnation of the Christian religion, not only for its opposition to scientific advance but for many other failings:

Since the earliest days the church as an organization has thrown itself violently against every effort to liberate the body and mind of man. It has been, at all times and everywhere, the habitual and incorrigible defender of bad governments, bad laws, bad social theories, bad institutions. It was, for centuries, an apologist for slavery, as it was apologist for the divine right of kings. . . . In the domain of pure ideas one branch of the church clings to the archaic speculations of Thomas Aquinas and the other labors under the preposterous nonsense of John Calvin. . . .

The only real way to reconcile science and religion is to set up something that is not science and something that is not religion. . . . To argue that the gaps in

knowledge which still confront the seeker must be filled, not by patient inquiry, but by intuition or revelation, is simply to give ignorance a gratuitous and preposterous dignity. When a man so indulges himself it is only to confess that, to that extent at least, he is not a scientist at all, but a theologian, for he attempts to reconcile science and religion by the sorry device of admitting that the latter is somehow superior to the former, and is thus entitled to all territories that remain unoccupied. (260–261)

These were, for all practical purposes, Mencken's last words on religion, and their truth and relevance seem only to have increased in the sixty years since their writing.

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John Stuart Mill

S. T. Joshi

One of the towering intellects of the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) distinguished himself in a number of disciplines, including philosophical logic, political economy, ethics, and feminism. Although best known today by the slim but immensely influential treatise *On Liberty* (1859), Mill in his own time was known as a leading proponent of the philosophical school known as utilitarianism, with its central theory of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number”—a school that today continues to have widespread support among philosophers. Mill’s early advocacy of equal rights for women, including woman suffrage, helped to lay the groundwork that ultimately led to the overthrow of legal, social, and political barriers for women in both England and the United States.

Religion was, on the surface, only a side issue with Mill, as evidenced by the late and posthumously published *Three Essays on Religion*. But several recent studies have argued convincingly that his lifelong thoughts about the existence and nature of God, the afterlife, and the place of religion in society lay just below the surface of much of his work on ethics and politics. In the course of his career, Mill dissected a number of central tenets of religion and helped to establish the intellectual cogency of such issues as the free discussion of religion, the separation of church and state, and the development of a secular ethic.

THE LIFE OF A POLYMATH

In 1873 Mill told his own life in his *Autobiography*, one of the most poignant documents of the nineteenth century. Although written with the impeccable precision, reserve, and fluency that mark his entire work, the

Autobiography exhibits the remarkable early life of a man whose upbringing seemed destined to single him out from the mass of humanity. Mill was born in London on May 20, 1806, one of the nine children of the Scottish philosopher and historian James Mill (1773–1836), who appeared determined to test his ideas on education in the living laboratory of his own son. Accordingly, John was taught the rudiments of Greek at the age of three and Latin at eight; he was also fed heavy doses of ancient literature, mathematics, modern European history, and English poetry. He learned philosophical logic at the age of twelve and first read Jeremy Bentham—who, along with Mill’s own father, had devised a rudimentary theory of utilitarianism—at about the age of fifteen. The Mill family, in fact, spent several summers with Bentham at Ford Abbey in Devonshire in the 1810s. Mill testified eloquently to the overwhelming impact of Bentham’s philosophy on his developing intellect:

The Benthamic standard of “the greatest happiness” was that which I had always been taught to apply; I was even familiar with an abstract discussion of it, forming an episode in an unpublished dialogue on Government, written by my father on the Platonic model. Yet in the first pages of Bentham it burst upon me with all the force of novelty. . . . The feeling rushed upon me, that all previous moralists were superseded, and that here indeed was the commencement of a new era in thought. (*Autobiography*, 42–43)

In regard to Mill’s early religious outlook, the second chapter of his autobiography is of the highest importance. Once again, his father’s views were central to the views he himself came to adopt. Mill noted that his father “remained in a state of perplexity, until, doubtless after many struggles, he yielded to the conviction that, concerning the origin of things nothing whatever can be known. This is the only correct statement of his opinion; for dogmatic atheism he looked upon as absurd; as most of those, whom the world has considered Atheists, have always done” (27). As a result, James Mill refused to indoctrinate his son with religious belief, although he “took care that I should be acquainted with what had been thought by mankind on these impenetrable problems” (29). The end result was striking:

I am thus one of the very few examples, in this country, of one who has, not thrown off religious belief, but never had it: I grew up in a negative state with regard to it. I looked upon the modern exactly as I did upon the ancient religion, as something which in no way concerned me. It did not seem to me more strange that English people should believe what I did not, than that the men I read of in Herodotus should have done so. (29)

This lack of religious training did have, in Mill’s mind, one drawback: “In giving me an opinion contrary to that of the world, my father thought it necessary to give it as one which could not prudently be avowed to the world” (29). Mill went on to say, “The great advance in liberty of discussion, which

is one of the most important differences between the present time and that of my childhood, has greatly altered the moralities of this question” (30); but if so, it is curious that Mill did not make efforts to publish his *Three Essays on Religion* in his lifetime.

James Mill, who was a high functionary in the quasi-governmental entity the East India Company, felt that college would do little to foster his son’s education, so in 1823 he found a place for him in the company as a clerk. Mill continued in his employment at the East India Company until 1858, himself rising up the ranks to become head of the office of India Correspondence. Mill was not, however, devoid of the kind of intellectual stimulation that college brings: Beginning as early as 1822, he became a member of several informal debating societies, including the Utilitarian Society (which Mill himself named and formed) and the London Debating Society. It was here that he became acquainted with a number of his lifelong friends, including George Grote (later the author of a celebrated *History of Greece*) and John Austin. Mill had begun publishing brief essays and letters in newspapers and magazines as early as 1822.

“One incident that Mill did not mention in his autobiography was his arrest in 1824 for distributing birth control literature to the poor. Under the influence of Thomas Malthus, and also witnessing the desperate plight of the poor near his office at India House, Mill felt a moral compulsion to educate the poor on this issue. For his pains, he was sentenced by the Lord Mayor to two weeks in prison. While not directly relevant to his religious views, the incident certainly suggests Mill’s disagreement with the biblical injunction ‘Be fruitful, and multiply.’”

—Gen. 1:28

But in 1826 Mill suffered a “crisis” in his intellectual and emotional life. It is worth citing his own description of it in his *Autobiography*:

I was in a dull state of nerves, such as everybody is occasionally liable to; unsusceptible to enjoyment or pleasurable excitement; one of those moods when what is pleasure at other times, becomes insipid or indifferent; the state, I should think, in which converts to Methodism usually are, when smitten by their first “conviction of sin.” In this frame of mind it occurred to me to put the question directly to myself: “Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?” And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, “No!” At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for. (87)

This remarkable testament suggests that James Mill's relentless education of his son had had the serious drawback of stunting Mill's social and emotional life. It is sad to read that during his youth, "I had ample leisure in every day to amuse myself; but as I had no boy companions, and the animal need of physical activity was satisfied by walking, my amusements, which were mostly solitary, were in general of a quiet, if not a bookish turn" (*Autobiography*, 25). Clearly, James Mill had attempted to make his son a kind of "thinking machine"; Mill, in fact, noted of his father, "For passionate emotions of all sorts, and for everything which has been said or written in exaltation of them, he professed the greatest contempt" (33).

Mill emerged from this nearly suicidal state in an unusual way. Having by chance picked up the memoirs of the French writer Jean-François Marmontel, he came upon Marmontel's touching account of the death of his father: "A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears. From this moment my burthen grew lighter. The oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me, was gone. I was no longer hopeless: I was not a stock or a stone" (91). Shortly thereafter, Mill discovered the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge (with both of whom he later established contact), finding in their Romanticism the elevation of human feeling that he sought. But it was not simply the revival of his emotions that he found so vital at this critical turning point; as Alan P. F. Sell noted, "The poems made him sensitive to the feelings of others, and by so doing became a spur in his quest for social reform" (13).

Mill, indeed, at this juncture began deviating from orthodox utilitarian doctrine, which similarly downplayed the emotions and regarded happiness as a purely rational choice. The evolution of his own version of utilitarianism took far greater account of human feelings than the work of Bentham or James Mill and thereby gained added intellectual cogency by basing its reasoning on the full human being.

Another climactic moment in Mill's life was his acquaintance with Harriet Taylor in 1830. At that time a twenty-two-year-old woman married to John Taylor, a London merchant, Harriet became for Mill "the most admirable person I had ever known" (*Autobiography*, 119). Although even some of Mill's friends and supporters expressed puzzlement at the glowing terms in which he spoke of Harriet, it is clear that his words were inspired by deep affection, as well as an admiration of her "intellectual gifts," which Mill stated "did but minister to a moral character at once the noblest and the best balanced which I have ever met with in life" (*Autobiography*, 121). Although John and Harriet were intent on observing the proprieties as far as they could, there is some evidence that their continual association was looked upon with disfavor by friends and colleagues—as well as by Mill's own parents. In spite of their intellectual and emotional bond, there could be no thought of divorce for Harriet. After nearly two decades, the matter was settled for them by John Taylor's death in 1849. Two years later, they married. Their union evidently

led to an estrangement from Mill's mother, and it is believed that this was the chief reason Mill did not so much as mention her in his *Autobiography*.

There is no reason to doubt Mill's statements that much of the work he wrote during this period was heavily influenced by Harriet's input. Clearly she had much to offer on questions of ethics and politics from her unique perspective as a sharp-witted and emotionally engaged woman. Mill's first major work, *A System of Logic* (1843), which established his credentials as a radical empiricist, probably owes little to Harriet; but such later works as *Principles of Political Economy* (1849) and, most notably, *On Liberty* probably do contain substantial traces of Harriet's thinking. In regard to the latter work, Mill stated, "The 'Liberty' was more directly and literally our joint production than anything else which bears my name, for there was not a sentence of it that was not several times gone through by us together, turned over in many ways, and carefully weeded of any faults, either of thought or expression, that we detected in it" (*Autobiography*, 161).

Regrettably, Harriet's death in 1858, after only seven years of marriage, cast a shadow over the rest of Mill's life. Mill, of course, continued to write, producing such works as *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861) and *Utilitarianism* (1863). In 1865, this otherwise reclusive scholar was persuaded to run for a seat in Parliament. Although largely an intellectual comfortable within the confines of his study, Mill always regarded his work as having direct practical applications. Both he and his father had been involved in the passage of the Reform Act of 1832, which introduced numerous reforms that reduced corruption in Parliament, particularly by eliminating "rotten boroughs" and broadening suffrage (although it explicitly banned woman suffrage). But by the 1860s, it was apparent that further reforms were necessary, and Mill was persuaded to run to add his voice to the actual deliberations of the next reform bill. It is highly significant that among the several conditions Mill laid down before he agreed to run is the following: "On one subject only, my religious opinions, I announced from the beginning that I would answer no questions" (*Autobiography*, 181). Then (as, sadly, now, at least in the United States), the affirmation of atheism or even agnosticism was considered so severe a political liability that it would essentially bar a candidate from success at the polls.

Mill won a seat in Parliament and led the campaign for the Reform Act of 1867, which radically expanded (male) suffrage; in fact, the bill was passed largely as a means of warding off an even broader granting of the suffrage. But Mill's parliamentary career came to an abrupt end in 1868—and the main cause was, interestingly, religion. His donation of a small amount of money to the reelection campaign of the notorious atheist Charles Bradlaugh was used by his political opponents to turn the voters against him, and he was defeated. Retiring to Avignon, France, Mill put the finishing touches on both *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and his *Autobiography*, the latter of which had been begun as early as 1854. There is something fitting in the fact that in 1872,

he served as the (secular) godfather of the son of his friend in Parliament, Lord John Russell. This child would grow up to become Bertrand Russell, who, more than anyone, carried on Mill's work in philosophical logic, ethics, and political freedom. Mill died in Avignon twelve days before his sixty-seventh birthday, on May 8, 1873.

THE REFUTATION OF THEISM

Mill's three essays on religion—"Nature," "Utility of Religion," and "Theism," the last being as long as the other two combined—were written over a long period. The first two were drafted between 1850 and 1858, the third between 1868 and 1870. Whatever the reasons for Mill's disinclination to publish these essays, there is no question of their cogency in attacking, and perhaps destroying, several of the major pillars of religious thought, particularly as regards the existence of God, the characteristics of God even if he is assumed to exist, the probability of immortality, and the role of religion in the formation and functioning of a viable moral system.

It is worth beginning with the essay on "Theism," as it presents Mill's most wide-ranging arguments on the subject; the other two essays deal with more limited facets of the question of religious belief and its ramifications. The first part of the essay deals with four of the principal "proofs" that theologians have adduced in support of the existence of a deity. But before he engaged in the analysis of these "proofs," Mill outlined his methodology:

It is indispensable that the subject of religion should from time to time be reviewed as a strictly scientific question, and that its evidences should be tested by the same scientific methods, and on the same principles as those of any of the speculative conclusions drawn by physical science. It being granted then that the legitimate conclusions of science are entitled to prevail over all opinions, however widely held, which conflict with them, and that the canons of scientific evidence which the successes and failures of two thousand years have established, are applicable to all subjects on which knowledge is attainable, let us proceed to consider what place there is for religious beliefs on the platform of science; what evidences they can appeal to, such as science can recognize, and what foundation there is for the doctrines of religion, considered as scientific theorems. (*Three Essays on Religion* [hereafter abbreviated *TE*], 128–129)

Alan P. F. Sell, citing this very passage, delivered a strong criticism: "The position begs the huge question that the methods of science, construed as Mill construes it—that is, naturalistically and empirically—are competent to weigh religious claims. Nowhere does Mill defend his stance; he simply announces it and expects his readers to take it on trust" (136). But Sell read "Theism" very carelessly and, perhaps, tendentiously. The fact is that Mill *did* justify his stance in the very next section of the essay by maintaining that it was the

advance of science that had led to the establishment of monotheism over polytheism in the first place. He asserted plausibly that polytheism is a more “natural” view of the world than monotheism, given that primitive “animism” (which assumed that all entities were governed by individual gods) was the foundation of polytheistic belief. It was only when, in Mill’s estimation, science established that nature was a “unified whole” (*TE*, 133) that the notion of a monotheistic creator-god became plausible. Whatever the historicity of Mill’s anthropology of religion here, it is evident that he believed theism was indeed a direct outgrowth of science: “The reason, then, why Monotheism may be accepted as the representative of Theism in the abstract, is not so much because it is the Theism of all the more improved portions of the human race, as because it is the only theism which can claim for itself any footing on scientific ground” (*TE*, 133). Mill also implied, without explicitly stating, that many of the fundamental tenets of monotheism and of religious belief in general are, in fact, based on appeals to science: The very claim that God created the universe is a scientific claim and can therefore be legitimately assessed from the most up-to-date findings of science. Moreover, most of the arguments in “Theism” are based not on science but on philosophical logic, arguments of exactly the sort utilized by Thomas Aquinas and other defenders of “natural religion.”

Mill first treated the notion of a First Cause. The argument he addressed is as follows: “Everything that we know (it is argued) had a cause, and owed its existence to that cause. How then can it be but that the world, which is but a name for the aggregate of all that we know, has a cause to which it is indebted for its existence?” (*TE*, 142). Mill’s discussion of this “proof” is quite complex and, at points, vitiated by subsequent scientific discovery. It rests upon the purportedly eternal existence of what he called Matter and Force (what today would be called energy). Mill never attempted to prove that these entities are, in fact, eternal but merely assumed it. Nevertheless, his conclusion—“Theism, therefore, in so far as it rests on the necessity of a First Cause, has no support from experience” (*TE*, 150)—appears sound. Bertrand Russell would later deliver a much more crushing refutation of the First Cause argument, and today it is rarely invoked by theologians.

The second “proof” discussed by Mill is the “argument from the general consent of mankind.” Surprisingly, Mill did not address one obvious refutation of this argument: that belief in God is not, in fact, “universal” anymore and therefore cannot be likened to some kind of “instinct” like breathing. Perhaps Mill was deterred by the relative smallness of the number of explicitly avowed atheists (because of continuing legal punishments dealt out to those who purportedly engaged in “blasphemy” or in “insulting” the Christian religion), so that it could (even if implausibly) be suggested that these few benighted souls were so morally and intellectually corrupt that they could not see the obvious existence of God. What Mill did state was that this argument was merely an appeal to authority—but in this case, the authority was not one

single (and presumably intellectually eminent) human being, but the great mass of humanity. Mill went on to say that this argument was dubious because, even if it was assumed that all or most human beings actually did have some belief in God, that belief was so variable that it was impossible to imagine that all human beings were believing in the same god. Consider the animistic beliefs of primitive tribes:

The religious belief of savages is not belief in the God of Natural Theology, but a mere modification of this crude generalization which ascribes life, consciousness and will to all natural powers of which they cannot perceive the source or control the operation. And the divinities believed in are as numerous as those powers. Each river, fountain or tree has a divinity of its own. To see in this blunder of primitive ignorance the hand of the Supreme Being implanting in his creatures an instinctive knowledge of his existence, is a poor compliment to the Deity. (*TE*, 157–158)

Although this essay was written just prior to Edward Burnett Tylor's exhaustive treatment of primitive religion in the landmark anthropological treatise *Primitive Culture* (1871), Mill was clearly drawing upon prior anthropological work to suggest that notions of godhead are almost as numerous and variable as the individuals who hold them.

The third "proof" of the existence of God is "the argument from consciousness." This is simply the argument that there is some kind of "inward light" (*TE*, 162) that leads us inexorably to believe in God. Mill, rightly tracing this idea to the logic of Descartes, made the obvious counterargument that it is impossible to know that such a belief is not the product of delusion. In effect, such a belief is nothing more than "a *naïf* expression of the tendency of the human mind to believe what is agreeable to it" (*TE*, 166).

THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

The fourth argument—"the argument from marks of design in nature"—was treated by Mill more exhaustively than the others, because he believed it had the greatest plausibility of the four he was discussing. The argument, which he asserted was "wholly grounded on experience," goes as follows:

Certain qualities, it is alleged, are found to be characteristic of such things as are made by an intelligent mind for a purpose. The order of Nature, or some considerable parts of it, exhibit these qualities in a remarkable degree. We are entitled, from this great similarity of effects, to infer similarity in the cause, and to believe that things which it is beyond the power of man to make, but which resemble the works of man in all but power, must have been made by Intelligence, armed with a power greater than human. (*TE*, 167)

The best-known proponent of this argument was William Paley, who put forth a celebrated analogy: If one found a watch on a deserted island, one would naturally assume that it had been created by a watchmaker. But Mill destroyed this argument in one sentence: “If I found a watch on an apparently desolate island, I should indeed infer that it had been left there by a human being; but the inference would not be from marks of design, but because I already knew by direct experience that watches are made by men” (*TE*, 168). But the pooriness of this particular analogy should not prejudice us from assessing it carefully. Mill, in fact, presented a better-reasoned case for the argument from design:

The circumstances in which it is alleged that the world resembles the works of man are not circumstances taken at random, but are particular instances of a circumstance which experience shows to have a real connection with an intelligent origin, the fact of conspiring to an end. The argument therefore is not one of mere analogy. As mere analogy it has its weight, but it is more than analogy. It surpasses analogy exactly as induction surpasses it. It is an inductive argument. (*TE*, 169–170)

At this point Mill brought in, as a counterweight, the still relatively new doctrine of the theory of evolution, which he explicitly referred to (in quotation marks) as “‘the survival of the fittest’” (*TE*, 172). After stating the theory (which, it is now widely acknowledged, did indeed overthrow the argument from design—which is no doubt why it continues to be vilified by the pious), Mill wrote: “It must be acknowledged that there is something very startling, and *prima facie* improbable in this hypothetical history of Nature” (*TE*, 173). It is not clear how thoroughly Mill was educated in science: By his account, his early readings were largely in the realm of philosophy, history, and belles lettres. It is evident that he did not fully understand the ramifications of the theory of evolution, and perhaps no one at this time—only a decade or so after the theory’s promulgation in Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* (1859)—could have done so. The best Mill could say was that “the theory if admitted would be in no way whatever inconsistent with Creation. But it must be acknowledged that it would greatly attenuate the evidence for it” (*TE*, 174). Mill’s final conclusion in regard to the argument from design was as follows: “I think it must be allowed that, in the present state of our knowledge, the adaptations in Nature afford a large balance of probability in favour of creation by intelligence” (*TE*, 174).

Some of Mill’s secular colleagues were taken aback at this apparent gesture of letting God in by the back door after so many devastating rebuttals to standard arguments for his existence; but Mill did not afford much comfort to religionists in his discussion of what he took to be the attributes of his deity, which forms the next section of “Theism.” Here Mill immediately rejected the notion of a god who is both omnipotent and benevolent. The omnipotence of

God is, in particular, a hypothesis that must be abandoned. Mill assumed that the universe is infinite, and that therefore matter and force (i.e., energy) could not have been *created* by God: “There is in Nature no reason whatever to suppose that either Matter or Force, or any of their properties, were made by the Being who was the author of the collocations by which the world is adapted to what we consider as its purposes; or that he has power to alter any of those properties” (*TE*, 178). In other words, Mill was putting forth the argument—held by a wide array of thinkers from classical antiquity to the present—that God can manipulate only the materials already in existence, and that his power to do so is necessarily finite. Mill went on to state that the abundant defects in Nature, both cosmic and human, make it unlikely that an omnipotent god could not have done better with the existing materials:

The human body, for example, is one of the most striking instances of artful and ingenious contrivance which nature offers, but we may well ask whether so complicated a machine could not have been made to last longer, and not to get so easily and frequently out of order. We may ask why the human race should have been so constituted as to grovel in wretchedness and degradation for countless ages before a small portion of it was enabled to lift itself into the very imperfect state of intelligence, goodness and happiness which we enjoy. (*TE*, 181–182)

This argument is also venerable and can be traced at least to Lucretius’ pungent one-sentence utterance “*Tanta stat praedita culpa*” ([The universe] stands endowed with so many flaws; *De Rerum Natura* 5.199).

It is at this point that we should turn our attention to the essay on “Nature,” for it was here that Mill most vividly and even bitterly made the case for the nonomnipotence of God. On its face, this essay would seem to have little to do with religion, as it begins with a discussion of two of the central meanings of the term *nature* (first as referring to all entity, and second as being distinguished from art or [human] artifice); but Mill gravitated to the notion that nature cannot be a model for emulation by human beings, because it is, in fact, both vicious and destructive:

A single hurricane destroys the hopes of a season; a flight of locusts, or an inundation, desolates a district; a trifling chemical change in an edible root, starves a million of people. The waves of the sea, like banditti seize and appropriate the wealth of the rich and the little all of the poor with the same accompaniments of stripping, wounding, and killing as their human antitypes. Everything in short, which the worst men commit either against life or property is perpetuated on a larger scale by natural agents. Nature has Noyades more fatal than those of Carrier; her explosions of fire damp are as destructive as human artillery; her plague and cholera far surpass the poison cups of the Borgias. Even the love of “order” which is thought to be a following of the ways of Nature, is in fact a contradiction of them. All which people are accustomed to deprecate as “disorder” and its consequences, is precisely a counterpart of Nature’s ways.

Anarchy and the Reign of Terror are overmatched in injustice, ruin, and death, by a hurricane and a pestilence. (*TE*, 30–31)

Mill has been criticized for presenting a one-sided view of nature as purely destructive—so different from the benevolence of nature found in the poetry of Wordsworth, which he admired—but of course it was to his purpose to do so: He was here addressing one of the most vexing of theological issues, the problem of evil. Why, in short, is there so much evil (whether “natural” as depicted above or “human” evil as embodied in supposed “sins”) if God is believed to be both omnipotent and benevolent? Mill was right to berate the “sophistry” of theologians who would gloss over the sufferings of the world merely to maintain the academic theological point of God’s simultaneous omnipotence and benevolence. His own argument had been anticipated by David Hume in a laconic passage in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*: “If he [God] is willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. If he is able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?” (66). This question remains unanswerable by orthodox Christian theology, and Mill’s own solution—that in order to save the mere existence of God, it is better to give up his omnipotence than his benevolence—is surely the least unpalatable that could be offered.

“Christian morality (so called) has all the character of a reaction; it is, in great part, a protest against paganism. Its ideal is negative rather than positive; passive rather than active; innocence rather than nobleness; abstinence from evil rather than energetic pursuit of good; in its precepts (as has been well said) ‘thou shalt not’ predominates unduly over ‘thou shalt.’ In its horror of sensuality, it made an idol of asceticism which has been gradually compromised away into one of legality.”

—John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 112

Returning to the essay on “Theism,” let us see how Mill elaborated on his notion of the probable attributes of a god of limited power. He stated, “It does appear that granting the existence of design, there is a preponderance of evidence that the Creator desired the pleasure of his creatures” (*TE*, 191). He could come to this conclusion because pleasure (for human beings) does, in fact, exist in the world, and in a multitude of forms. (This very notion is predicated on Mill’s utilitarianism, whereby “happiness” is strictly defined as pleasure, whether it be active pleasure or the elimination or absence of pain.) But from the mere existence of pain in the world, it cannot be asserted that “the single end and aim of Creation was the happiness of his creatures”:

If the motive of the Deity for creating sentient beings was the happiness of the beings he created, his purpose, in our corner of the universe at least, must be

pronounced, taking past ages and all countries and races into account, to have been thus far an ignominious failure; and if God had no purpose but our happiness and that of other living creatures it is not credible that he would have called them into existence with the prospect of being so completely baffled. (*TE*, 192)

And so, once again, we are forced to assume a deity whose powers are limited.

IMMORTALITY

Mill continued his essay on “Theism” with a discussion of the issue of immortality. He began by asserting that the very notion of the immortality of the soul becomes problematical, because the soul has been misconceived as a unitary substance rather than what it actually is: a “bundle of attributes, the attributes of feeling, thinking, reasoning, believing, willing, &c.” (*TE*, 197). It is therefore not immediately obvious how this bundle of attributes could survive the extinction of the body to which it appears so intimately wedded. However, Mill was not as inexorably hostile to the notion of immortality as one might imagine. He flatly asserted: “There is . . . in science, no evidence against the immortality of the soul but that negative evidence, which consists in the absence of evidence in its favour. And even the negative evidence is not so strong as negative evidence often is” (*TE*, 201). However, Mill had little difficulty in dispensing with some of the theoretical arguments put forth in support of immortality: “We are told that the desire of immortality is one of our instincts, and that there is no instinct which has not corresponding to it a real object fitted to satisfy it” (*TE*, 204). On this point Mill could have cited the argument that many others, including H. L. Mencken, advanced—that as a matter of fact, the “instinct” is not, in fact, universal, and that there are any number of people who have no desire for immortality—but Mill took the argument on its face and presented a refutation on its own principles:

Granting that wherever there is an instinct there exists something such as that instinct demands, can it be affirmed that this something exists in boundless quantity, or sufficient to satisfy the infinite craving of human desires? What is called the desire of eternal life is simply the desire of life; and does there not exist that which this desire calls for? Is there not life? And is not the instinct, if it be an instinct, gratified by the possession and preservation of life? To suppose that the desire of life guarantees to us personally the reality of life through all eternity, is like supposing that the desire of food assures us that we shall always have as much as we can eat through our whole lives and as much longer as we can conceive our lives to be protracted to. (*TE*, 205)

Turning to specific arguments on immortality offered by natural theology, Mill made pretty much the same rebuttal, this one enlivened by dry wit:

One thing . . . is quite certain in respect to God’s government of the world; that he either could not, or would not, grant to us every thing we wish. We wish for

life, and he has granted some life: that we wish (or some of us wish) for a boundless extent of life and that it is not granted, is no exception to the ordinary modes of his government. Many a man would like to be a Croesus or an Augustus Caesar, but has his wishes gratified only to the moderate extent of a pound a week or the Secretaryship of his Trades Union. There is, therefore, no assurance whatever of a life after death, on grounds of natural religion. (*TE*, 209–210)

Mill devoted a chapter to the plausibility of there being a revelation from God (in the form of the Bible or other scriptures) that involves an analysis of the likelihood of miracles. His conclusion—“Miracles have no claim whatever to the character of historical facts and are wholly invalid as evidences of any revelation” (*TE*, 239)—is pretty much along the lines that David Hume had offered a century earlier.

What evoked the greatest controversy, especially among Mill’s secularist colleagues, was the final chapter of the essay on “Theism,” entitled “General Result.” After waging so exhaustive a battle against the standard arguments of theology, it was startling for Mill to assert once again (based on his misunderstanding of Darwin) that “the indication given by such evidence as there is, points to the creation, not indeed of the universe, but of the present order of it by an Intelligent Mind, whose power over the materials was not absolute, whose love for his creatures was not his sole actuating inducement, but who nevertheless desired their good” (*TE*, 243). This statement would have been bad enough, but Mill went on to maintain that the current state of knowledge even allowed for a “hope” of the immortality of the soul: “It appears to me that the indulgence of hope with regard to the government of the universe and the destiny of man after death, while we recognize as a clear truth that we have no ground for more than a hope, is legitimate and philosophically defensible” (*TE*, 249). This bizarre conclusion—which simultaneously asserts that the “hope” is not particularly likely but is nonetheless “defensible”—was not of a sort to satisfy critics on either side of the issue. Alan Millar noted, “It is one thing to be hopeful about what for all we know might be the case when we think there is at least some chance that it may be so. It is another to indulge hope where we have no reason to think there is such a chance” (198).

Several reasons have been put forth for Mill’s somehow trying to please both theists and nontheists in this way. Perhaps the most plausible is his inveterate tendency to try to find something good in even the weakest of arguments, and his attempts—most notably as a practical politician—to look for common ground even among the most widely discordant views. A provocative comment made in passing in the essay “Puseyism” (1842) may be worth citing: “We not only esteem it a more healthful exercise of the mind to employ itself in learning from an enemy, than in inveighing against him; but, we believe, that the extirpation of what is erroneous in any system of belief is in no way so much promoted as by extricating from it, and incorporating into our own system, whatever in it is true” (*Collected Works* [hereafter

CW], 24.812). Whether Mill, indeed, ever “incorporated” any belief in immortality into his own philosophy is to be doubted; but perhaps he was guided by a desire not to rob his readers—most of whom no doubt did believe in it—entirely of this comforting belief.

THE RELIGION OF HUMANITY

In many ways, “Utility of Religion” is the most provocative of the *Three Essays on Religion*, for it is here that Mill not only addressed the central issue of the interaction of religion and morality but also put forth his own substitute religion, the “Religion of Humanity” (TE, 109). The first topic was one by which Mill had long been fascinated, and he was resolute in asserting that there is, in fact, no necessary connection between morality and religion. As early as 1823, in a series of letters on “Free Discussion” (i.e., of religion), he bluntly asserted that “even if (which God forbid) all sense of religion were to die away among men, there would still remain abundant motives to ensure good conduct in this life” (CW, 22.17). Mill did not elaborate on the point in these letters, but he did so in “Utility of Religion” and other documents. The essay as a whole treats the subject of religion’s “usefulness” apart from its supposed truth. Mill acknowledged that this very issue came to the fore only when religion’s “truth had in a great measure ceased to convince” (TE, 70). Although he stated that it is “perfectly conceivable that religion may be morally useful without being intellectually sustainable” (TE, 73–74), the bulk of his essay presents a strong refutation of this claim.

Mill began the essay by stating the truism that good morals must, of course, be inculcated in the people and, as a practical matter, that such instruction is currently in the hands of religious authorities, chiefly in the form of state schools controlled by the Church of England. Mill also spoke of the indoctrination of children into religious belief. But he went on to state that these forces, which in fact had once led (although with some unfortunate side effects) to good conduct in individuals, were now weakening. In particular, Christianity’s constant use of the threat of hell to enforce morality had now become very weak: “Rewards and punishments postponed to that distance of time, and never seen by the eye, are not calculated, even when infinite and eternal, to have, on ordinary minds, a very powerful effect in opposition to strong temptation” (TE, 89). What is more, it is obvious that the morals recommended by religion are obeyed, not because they were religious, but because they are, in fact, good morals, apart from their endorsement by any system of theism. Therefore the separation of morals from theism will simply leave them still viable as self-standing principles.

Finally, there are various dangers in attributing morality to supernatural forces. In the first place, it seems quite unnecessary: “Are not moral truths strong enough in their own evidence, at all events to retain the belief of

mankind when once they have acquired it?" (TE, 97). But there is a further danger:

There is a very real evil consequent on ascribing a supernatural origin to the received maxims of morality. That origin consecrates the whole of them, and protects them from being discussed or criticized. So that if among the moral doctrines received as a part of religion, there be any which are imperfect—which were either erroneous from the first, or not properly limited and guarded in the expression, or which, unexceptionable once, are no longer suited to the changes that have taken place in human relations (and it is my firm belief that in so-called christian morality, instances of all these kinds are to be found)—these doctrines are considered equally binding on the conscience with the noblest, most permanent and most universal precepts of Christ. Wherever morality is supposed to be of supernatural origin, morality is stereotyped; as law is, for the same reason, among believers in the Koran. (TE, 99)

This striking anticipation of one of the central tenets of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* led Mill to reject supernaturalism as a basis for morals. In its place, he propounded the Religion of Humanity.

This conception was, at least in its rudiments, derived from Mill's early absorption in the work of Auguste Comte. Comte had proposed that human thought had evolved in three stages: the religious, the metaphysical, and the positive. The positive rests upon science and presents a kind of secularized religion somewhat along the lines that Mill advocated decades later. Mill, however, eventually broke from Comte—as evidenced by his late treatise, *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (1865)—because he felt that the details of Comte's "religion" had elements of authoritarianism and even irrationalism that he found repugnant. His own "Religion of Humanity" may strike us as a bit vague and abstract, but it is evident that he himself saw it as a viable alternative to religions whose fallacies had become too obvious to ignore.

Exactly what Mill actually meant by the "Religion of Humanity" is not always clear. In "Utility of Religion" he noted that "the sense of unity with mankind, and a deep feeling for the general good, may be cultivated into a sentiment and a principle capable of fulfilling every important function of religion and itself justly entitled to the name" (TE, 110). Mill believed that his religion was particularly unselfish, in contrast to some adherents of Christianity, who were so concerned about personal salvation that they regarded it as the highest good, as opposed to actual concern for their family, neighbors, and society. The only advantage of supernatural religions, in Mill's eyes, over his own religion was "the prospect they hold out to the individual of a life after death" (TE, 118). In contrast to what he said in "Theism," Mill here maintained that such a belief should be extirpated and would, in fact, be extirpated if the Religion of Humanity became prevalent:

If the Religion of Humanity were as sedulously cultivated as the supernatural religions are (and there is no difficulty in conceiving that it might be much

more so), all who had received the customary amount of moral cultivation would up to the hour of death live ideally in the life of those who are to follow them: and though doubtless they would often willingly survive as individuals for a much longer period than the present duration of life, it appears to me probable that after a length of time different in different persons, they would have had enough of existence, and would gladly lie down and take their eternal rest. (*TE*, 119–120)

Mill even went so far as to say that, with the passage of time, “not annihilation but immortality may be the burdensome idea” (*TE*, 122).

It may well be that the Religion of Humanity was a pipe dream of Mill’s, although there is no evidence that he ever thought it could be inculcated on a wide scale, at least not in the foreseeable future. It is not entirely clear what influence Mill’s views had on the subsequent development of secular humanism, but there is no doubt that he strongly anticipated this movement and put forth a theoretically viable counterpart to religion that was free of the crippling defects to which conventional religion was increasingly liable.

RELIGION AND SOCIETY

As noted, one of Mill’s earliest published writings, a series of three letters on “Free Discussion,” advocates freedom of the discussion of religion in the interest both of truth and of intellectual freedom. Here he presented strong arguments that if such freedom of discussion is not allowed, then the government becomes a *de facto* arbiter of all intellectual advance and thereby becomes despotic (see *CW*, 22.11). Mill developed these points in *On Liberty*, relying on the principle of fallibility. Since it is impossible for us to know, prior to engaging in a discussion, which opinion is true and which is false, it is dangerous to entrust the government with the power to suppress what it believes to be falsehood, for that falsehood may turn out to be the truth. In any event, truth can be ascertained only by the full airing of views on all sides; in the absence of such an airing, even a true belief can become stale and lifeless. Mill went so far as to state that Christianity itself, at least as the majority of its supposed believers adhered to it, had become just such a “dead belief” (*On Liberty*, 103).

It was on this basis that Mill expressed his lifelong opposition to the Church of England. An established church, supported by and indistinguishable from the government, has no incentive to develop and remain vital:

The Establishment, in its present state, is no corrective, but the great promoter of sectarianism; being itself, both in the exclusiveness of its tenets, and in the spirit of the majority of its clergy, a thoroughly sectarian institution. Its very essence is subscription to articles, and the bond of union which holds its members together is a dead creed, not a living spirit. (“Lord Brougham’s Defence of the Church Establishment” [1834]; *CW*, 6.229–230)

It is a bit surprising that Mill did not address the issue of religion's role in suppressing women's rights. In his late treatise, *The Subjection of Women*, which he admitted was deeply informed by discussions he had had with his wife, Christianity is scarcely mentioned. This omission contrasts starkly with the writing of the atheist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who in the fiery tract *Bible and Church Degrade Women* wrote that "the Church has done more to degrade woman than all other adverse influences put together" (315) and that "the whole tone of Church teaching in regard to woman is, to the last degree, contemptuous and degrading" (319). In only one passage did Mill address the issue:

We are told that Paul said, "Wives, obey your husbands:" but he also said, "Slaves, obey your masters." It was not St. Paul's business, nor was it consistent with his object, the propagation of Christianity, to incite any one to rebellion against existing laws. The apostle's acceptance of all social institutions as he found them, is no more to be construed as a disapproval of attempts to improve them at the proper time, than his declaration, "The powers that be are ordained of God," gives his sanction to military despotism. (85)

This is a most curious "defense." In the first place, there are many other passages in the Bible that endorse the "subjection" of women (one can go back to the Tenth Commandment—"Thou shalt not covet . . . thy neighbor's wife" [Exod. 20:17]—which plainly makes a wife the property of her husband); in the second place, it is an odd strategy to excuse Paul's remark on women (which is one of the mildest among many others he uttered) by also excusing his condoning of slavery. It remains a curiosity that Mill did not more forcefully press the role of Christianity in the continued oppression of women. Perhaps he felt such an approach would detract from the thrust of his argument, which was to advocate remedial measures for women and for society as a whole—a plan that might have been confounded if too much blame were put on Christianity or any other social forces for past derelictions.

John Stuart Mill's searching investigations of the scientific plausibility of religion, of the role of religion in forming morality, and of the precise place of a church within a state that purports to grant freedom to its citizens left a lasting legacy. Political partisans on both the right and the left draw upon his hallowed name as a source of their views; such thinkers in the empiricist tradition as Bertrand Russell and A. J. Ayer continued his inquiries into philosophical logic; and both religionists and secularists were compelled to address the points he had raised in his *Three Essays on Religion* and other writings. In attempting to carve out a middle ground between dogmatic religion and unequivocal atheism, he perhaps inevitably failed to please either side; but his writings, based on a lifetime of reading and thinking on the weightiest of human subjects, remain indispensable in their judicial weighing of the merits and defects of all the issues they treat.

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Kai Nielsen

Béla Szabados and Andrew Lugg

LET US BE HUMAN

An influential philosopher of many hats and a steadfast man of the Left, Kai Nielsen (born 1926) is the author of more than twenty-five books and four hundred articles on contemporary ethical and political theory, philosophy of religion, metaphilosophy, epistemology, and Marxism. He helped found the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, is past president of the Canadian Philosophical Association, and is currently a member of the Royal Society of Canada, professor emeritus at the University of Calgary, and adjunct professor at Concordia University in Montreal. Despite these heavy medals of honor, however, he remains as intellectually nimble as ever and continues to shed light in the dark and not so dark corners of philosophical and political thought, especially on specific questions of social policy and general questions of reason and rationality.

In the last five decades Nielsen has written copiously and regularly on religion and religious belief. He has hovered over what he takes to be the rubble and the ashes of our religious culture, rescuing whatever moral precepts he judges valuable and discarding what he sees as deadwood, especially ideas about God and his doings. But unlike philosophers who mourn the loss of our religious heritage, he is happy to see it go. He thinks it should wither away, all religion being, to his way of thinking, riddled with incoherent metaphysical commitments and responsible for untold harm. In *Atheism and Philosophy* he stated his position in characteristically strong terms. He wrote, “There are no good intellectual grounds for believing in God. And there is no human need, let alone necessity, for a non-evasive and informed person [nowadays] to have religious commitments of any kind” (78).

Whereas many atheists think that the fading away of religion can be left to take care of itself, Nielsen thinks it should not go unnoticed or forgotten and philosophers should do their part to bury it. In seven books he has done his best to encourage nonevasive and informed people to see religion as a farrago of absurdity, something that belongs to a less enlightened time—in fact, to a childish stage of human development. His critique of religion, one of the most sustained of our time, aims to expose the nonsense and provide the perplexed with a guide to a fuller kind of human flourishing. He aspires to articulate a secularism that is through-and-through naturalistic, that goes “all the way down” (*Naturalism and Religion*, 56).

In a recent lecture on ethics and political philosophy Nielsen stated his countercredo:

I believe a better world is possible and that we need not and should not live in the hell we live in now. I not only believe there is a lot of unnecessary suffering, unhappiness, and alienation now, but that in many respects the world we live in now—our social orders—can and should . . . be characterized as irrational. I believe in the possibility of moral progress and the possibility of economic progress. . . . And I believe that some social orders are more reasonable and more productive of happiness than others. (“Global Poverty and Global Justice”)

Even though he emphasized in the same lecture that he is “not an ‘Enlightenment rationalist’ or any other kind of rationalist,” he announced that he hopes to regain and reinvigorate the defensible core and the crucial values of the Enlightenment. He declared that “the Enlightenment is not a dead artifact of an earlier time” and pronounced himself in accord with “the various values of the Enlightenment.”

Nielsen has no time for the philosophical rationalism and foundationalism that defines traditional Enlightenment thinking. But neither does he sympathize with the philosophical antirationalism and antifoundationalism of much contemporary anti-Enlightenment thinking. He is as much a rationalist opponent of postmodernist excess as he is an antirationalist opponent of modernist excess. Not for him the easy confidence of premodernists, a faction he takes to include most contemporary religious thinkers, or the lazy relativism and nihilism of the worst of contemporary postmodernists. He judges questions about God to be “still on the cultural agenda” and believes their remaining “on the philosophical agenda for some [reveals] a cultural blindness and perhaps . . . as well a certain intellectual arrogance” (*God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 10). In his eyes the reaction of many postmodernists is “something like the mirror image of Christian fundamentalism” and however “wearisome for some of us now, after so much critical water has gone under the cultural bridge, to argue the case against pre-modernity yet again, . . . it is at least a cultural necessity” (*God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 10).

Nielsen proposes as an alternative an uncompromising secular humanism. He sees his work as “a mopping up operation” and speaks of himself as

attempting to do his “bit to bring to a completion what central figures of the Enlightenment started” and expects that “in two hundred years or so . . . human beings will still be making sense of their lives and the moral lives of people will remain intact even though belief in God and God-substitutes will have passed from the cultural scene” (*God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 11). He wrote, “My hope is that the loss of religious belief will not, as it need not, bring with it a moral wilderness. Indeed I look to a time when . . . there will be a greater human flourishing,” and added, “To not lose one’s nerve and continue to have a sense of social solidarity and some conception of a humane social order in an utterly secular world is in effect to affirm a form of humanism” (*God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 11). If there were a Templeton Prize for the nourishment of secular values, Kai Nielsen would be a prime candidate.

EARLY BELIEF AND UNBELIEF

In recent unpublished autobiographical notes Nielsen acknowledges that while his atheism is long-standing and deep, he comes at religion, to some degree, from the inside and is not without religious training and background. He notes that in contrast to his father, who was an atheist, his mother was a Christian Scientist, and that as a boy he attended Christian Science Sunday school for a couple of months (before being expelled for “repeatedly challenging the teacher”). Even then, however, he was more on the side of his father. Like his father, who told him he did not believe a word of Christian Science but thought it was “good for mother,” Nielsen believed that “such a religion was absurd,” and after a schoolmate had died because his Christian Scientist parents refused to take him to a doctor, Nielsen came to think “its consequences sometimes evil.” In retrospect Nielsen fancies that his father’s skepticism and good sense may have “rubbed off on [him] and engendered a scepticism about religion in [him].”

During his teenage years Nielsen recalls being neither religious nor antireligious, just thinking “Christian Science was bunk.” Interested at the time in sports (as well as literature), he ended up going to a Catholic academy, St. Ambrose Academy in Davenport, Iowa, to play basketball. Here he does not recall being pressured to believe—leaving aside his having to be present at prayers before each class—but sees himself as learning that “the Dominicans were intelligent men who believed in God,” a lesson he says he is “grateful . . . for.” Later on, after the war (in 1944, at the age of nineteen, he joined the merchant marines and served as a midshipman), he entered St. Ambrose College, the university associated with Ambrose Academy, and was required to study a considerable amount of Scholastic philosophy. For Nielsen these courses were mostly taught by professors using manuals and, with the exception of the course of a young lay professor, Frederick Flynn, were “dreadfully

boring.” Flynn taught using source material, and from him, Nielsen tells us, he learned “to read Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas themselves.”

One other important factor in Nielsen’s early life that played something of a role in his later career as an unwavering atheist was that before going off to war, he fell for “a girl who happened to be Catholic,” a girl he married when the war ended. “Because of my wife,” he observes, he became a Catholic, and there was a brief time, while he was an undergraduate student, “say, between the ages of twenty and twenty-three,” when he was religious, albeit “never without ambivalence.” In these years he felt Catholicism “was a coherent, comprehensive, and attractive system of belief quite unlike the crude versions of Protestantism that [I] was acquainted with as a child,” and he wished—or so he sees in retrospect—“to come to grips with religion,” “to make as sure as [I] could what, everything considered, [I] should believe and how [I] should live.” What seems to have woken him up was Flynn’s lectures on Aquinas’s five ways, all five of which—not least the third, the so-called cosmological argument, Aquinas’s “strangest argument”—he found unpersuasive. Seeing the defects in Aquinas’s proofs, Nielsen recalls, resulted in his losing his “recently acquired faith,” something he came to think was in any case “probably . . . humanly shallow.” Moreover while at St. Ambrose he became politically radical and found himself on picket lines in Davenport along with some of his Dominican professors, doubtless another influence on his future work. Nonetheless, during this period, he writes, he had “no sense . . . of the Catholic Church being a tool of reaction,” and he turned “to secularism . . . on purely philosophical grounds.”

“When I first gave up my Catholic faith I was fond of quoting a remark by Stephen Daedalus, Joyce’s partly (and ironically) autobiographical character’s reaction to another character named (as I recall) Buck Mulligan. Stephen tells him that he cannot make his Easter duty and Buck remarks, ‘So are you going to become a black Protestant then?’ Stephen replies, ‘I am not going to give up an absurd system which is logical and coherent for one which is illogical and incoherent.’”

—Kai Nielsen, unpublished autobiographical notes

“THE RIGHT TO DISBELIEVE”

Nielsen devotes considerable time and energy to challenging the metaphysics he sees as underlying the major theistic religions, Judaism and Islam as well as Christianity, it being essential, he thinks, that we “earn our disbelief” (*Atheism and Philosophy*, 81). While recognizing that theism is many-sided, with sides that bear no more than a family resemblance to one another, he sees it as having a common core: the claim that there is a God. Taking this claim to be

foundational for most religions, he mercilessly attacks on two fronts arguments that purport to show there is a deity. He critically examines the traditional arguments for the existence of God and attempts to show that the very concept of God makes no sense.

The question of the truth of claims about the existence of God is well-trodden ground, and Nielsen patiently and carefully treads it again (see especially *Reason and Practice*, 135–203). He rejects the ontological argument that to understand clearly the concept of God is to realize that God *must* exist on the grounds that a thing cannot be defined into existence: Understanding a concept is one thing, but showing that it is instantiated is another. He rejects the cosmological argument that there has to be a God on which everything depends since were there not, everything would depend on something else (and an infinite regression is impossible), on the grounds that it confuses an infinite series with a very long finite series, there being no need of an ultimate sustainer if the series is genuinely infinite. And he rejects—on the grounds that the natural sciences, evolutionary biology mostly, explain whatever needs explaining—the teleological argument that the universe exhibits a design that can be explained only given an infinite or perfect designer. Moreover, he challenges the view that proofs are unnecessary since we can get to know God through direct religious experience. He points out that such experience is not self-authenticating and is in any event explicable—without questioning the believer’s sincerity—naturalistically. From all this Nielsen concludes that natural theology—the attempt to demonstrate the existence of God rationally—is not a viable option, and that since it is unlikely to be resuscitated by philosophical paramedics, we have “the right to disbelieve.”

Nielsen’s critique of arguments for the existence of God is reminiscent of nothing so much as David Hume’s and Bertrand Russell’s critiques. It is both more philosophical than the critiques mounted by more scientifically minded atheists and very different in tone. Nielsen allows that it is an important strike against religion that it collides with physical and biological facts about the creation of the universe and human beings, and he agrees that these facts correct or refute fundamental tenets of religion. He thinks it is no minor problem that religion runs afoul of our shared scientific culture, and he uses the cumulative effect of scientific criticism to show the bankruptcy of belief in the deity. However, he mainly focuses on the traditional arguments for the existence of God, since he thinks it worthwhile trying to understand and assess the soundness of the old arguments. Particularly in his less militant moments he demonstrates an enviable capacity for understanding what motivates the theist who persists in thinking there is something to the arguments. He does not treat the philosophy of religion as a cold exercise in metaphysics and epistemology but grapples with it for the sake of disabusing the religious of their erroneous beliefs.

Since Nielsen’s background and interests are more literary than scientific, he is far less open to the charge of scientism than some of his atheist colleagues. When scientific atheists employ the best of contemporary science to correct

the false cosmological and biological pictures of the religious tradition, Nielsen applauds. He sees them as performing a useful public service. When they don the mantle of prophet and salesman of science, however, he draws back. He is hostile to any form of ideology and deprecates scientistic efforts to promote atheism, however well meaning. His efforts are directed more at probing the religious thinker's world picture and showing it indefensible than at underlining the implausibility of religious stories about the creation of human beings (and other factual beliefs at the heart of traditional religious pictures of the universe). He takes religion seriously and is honestly concerned about the traditional concept of God and whether religious statements are rightly branded as lacking cognitive content. He is not an atheist who, citing the principle that there is nothing wrong with spouting nonsense, happily prays and says grace. He thinks that in saying grace and praying, the religious are expressing something and what matters is how words are meant, not just what they mean, significance as well as reference.

In Nielsen's eyes the religious mindset is not opaque, and he never deems philosophical theists beneath contempt. Rather, he reflects on what makes them tick and what spiritual nourishment they take religion to provide. He wants to come to terms with the religious as people rather than as crazed individuals with deeply rooted psychological problems. Indeed, his approaches theism the way Anselm approached atheism. He sees them as failing to notice the multiple inconsistencies in their position in much the same way that St. Anselm saw atheists as failing to notice the inconsistency in granting that God by definition has all perfections and denying that he has the perfection of existence. Nielsen does not charge theists with irrationality and leave it at that; he invariably attempts to show that and how their arguments fail. Nobody can accuse him of name-calling or of seeing the rabbit and missing the duck or of hearing the notes but not the melody. He has a deep appreciation of the world of the religious and is far from deaf to the religious melody. It is just that he is convinced that a reasonable person should regard the world naturalistically and that another melody is less hard on the ears. He understands the idea of God's infusing a person's life and the idea of doing battle with the devil, but he thinks they are without substance and there are better ideas.

RELIGION AND REASON

Nielsen holds that anyone with a good understanding of Western scientific and philosophical culture should maintain that belief in the doctrinal systems of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is as unreasonable as belief in Zande witchcraft (*Atheism and Philosophy*, 246–247). He reckons it is possible to provide the transculturally necessary conditions for rational belief (and reasonableness), conditions that the doctrines of the major religions singularly

fail to meet. While critical of traditional philosophy, he is also “sceptical of [an] extensive scepticism about reason” (227). He counts it a mistake to suppose that reason and rationality are language-game- or form-of-life-specific and argues that there are requirements of rationality and reasonableness to which people should adhere regardless of their language games and forms of life. Rational, reasonable people will, he declares, shun views that are inconsistent or otherwise unintelligible; will attend to the available evidence, especially disconfirming evidence; and will consider the interconnectedness of their religious views with their other beliefs (241–242). Accordingly, leads Nielsen to hold it is irrational (at least unreasonable) to be a believing Jew, Christian, or Muslim, never mind a practicing one, because the doctrinal beliefs are inconsistent, unintelligible, at variance with the available evidence, and disconnected from other views characteristic of advanced twentieth-century thought.

In addition to rejecting natural theology and its arguments from reason and experience, Nielsen voices deep concerns about the logically prior question of whether talk about God even makes sense. He maintains that the concept of God is—anthropomorphic Zeus-like conceptions aside—irreparably incoherent, and in this connection he dwells on the topics of meaning and verification. Taking belief in God to be reasonable (and rational) only insofar as the term *God* makes sense, he argues that nothing could count as evidence for or against the belief in the existence of a nonanthropomorphic deity. This is a long-standing theme in his work, one that has resulted in his critique’s being dismissed by some theists. He began rejecting the cogency of religious belief on verificationist grounds and continues to question the verifiability of belief in nonanthropomorphic gods. Small wonder, then, that he is sometimes charged with appealing to a long-discredited theory of meaningfulness, one that is regularly dismissed as both excluding and allowing in too much. While Nielsen prides himself on rejecting the major “isms” of philosophy—essentialism, reductionism, foundationalism, and the rest—he seems committed to an equally questionable ism: verificationism.

Nielsen does not see it this way and attempts to get out of the corner by distinguishing good verificationism from bad. He elbows aside the reductionism about meaning central to the bad—positivistic and scientistic—version of the doctrine and applauds the recognition of the diversity of language games that he takes to be characteristic of good verificationism. More specifically, he recognizes verifiability as an important desideratum in the case of the language game of providing information. He insists that for a statement like “God exists” to have factual significance, it must be possible to indicate conditions under which it could be confirmed or rebutted. This position sounds like positivism but is, Nielsen thinks, quite different, it being a trivial point about what distinguishes sentences that make claims about the world from sentences that only appear to. Reasoning that it is undeniable that the question of the existence of God as traditionally understood concerns what there is, he thinks

it undeniable that the question is subject to verification or falsification. When the belief in God is examined without philosophical bias, he argues, it becomes clear that there is no evidence for it and could not be any, that is, that such an entity is as illusory as the ether.

For Nielsen religion involves “an empty play of words.” It should not be regarded as transgressing the bounds of sense in this or that predetermined manner. What puts it over the edge is that it does not (for whatever reason) convey information, that it is not (however one looks at it) factual. The problem is not that it is logically or structurally defective in the sense that it fails to satisfy a given criterion of meaningfulness, but that it fails to stand up to sustained critical scrutiny. In arguing for the emptiness of religion, Nielsen would have us see that it says nothing and, at crucial points, lapses into incoherence. This stance is not positivism, and Nielsen is not back where he started. Far from cleaving to the verifiability theory of meaningfulness, he does not espouse any theory of meaningfulness whatsoever. He focuses on the question of whether putative factual statements are cognitively meaningful and, only secondarily, on whether they are verifiable or not. In effect, he reverses the official positivist account of the relationship between meaning and verification. He claims that religious beliefs are unverifiable because they are meaningless, not that they are meaningless because they are unverifiable.

“Some have thought that I am becoming religious in my old age. Not at all. My atheism has become deeper and more entrenched the older I get. I am confident that I will carry it to my grave. It is difficult for me to understand how any educated and reflective person who could hold on to their brains and emotions could become a religious believer. Moreover, I haven’t the slightest wish (pace Dostoyevsky) that I could come to believe.”

—Kai Nielsen, unpublished autobiographical notes

When discussing the meaningfulness of religious belief, rather the meaninglessness of it, Nielsen is careful, as always, not to impugn the sincerity of the believer. He deprecates what he sees as illusion and nonsense but treats it as deserving careful examination, his ultimate aim being to help people of goodwill to see the light. What he says in his unpublished autobiographical notes concerning his attitudes immediately after he renounced religion in his undergraduate days is something he would still undoubtedly say today: He wanted to “make as sure as [I] could what generally should be thought, that is, what would be most reasonable and humanly satisfying for us featherless bipeds to believe and do.” He recognizes that “reasonable, intelligent, concerned, and reflective people of integrity [go] different ways on this.” Indeed, he wonders, “How could it be otherwise?” Still, he is adamant that, however “humanly

understandable,” belief in God and immortality is “a plain . . . mistake; a matter of either false belief or incoherence . . . an illusion that people repeatedly deceive themselves with.”

THE WITTGENSTEINIAN CHALLENGE

In *God, Scepticism and Modernity* Nielsen writes that he aims “to defend the values and basic conceptual framework of the Enlightenment against repeated and varied turns to religion from . . . forms of Wittgensteinian fideism and other forms, radical and non-radical, of religious revisionism” as well as “from metaphysical religiosity” (12). He sees Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians as posing an especially strong intellectual challenge to the secularism and post-religious culture he favors because of their attention to language, in particular their conception of religion as a language game in which prayer, giving thanks, benediction, confession, and solidarity of the human family as children of God have pride of place. He makes discriminations and treats prayers, expressions of thanks, and so on differently from metaphysical-cum-theological claims about the existence of God. But he also finds the fideistic forms of religion to be no better than older, more metaphysical forms of religion, with their emphasis on reference and information. In “Wittgensteinian Fideism,” the work in which he baptized and imaginatively reconstructed a view of religion from Wittgenstein’s later philosophy and snippets of his disciples’ writings, he rejects the resulting view as “absurd” (191). And in later work, notably *Naturalism and Religion*, he deprecates the policy of silence regarding ethics and politics that Wittgenstein advocates explicitly in the *Tractatus* and implicitly in the *Philosophical Investigations*. To Nielsen’s way of thinking, Wittgenstein was a conservative thinker both generally and regarding religion, one who unwittingly lent aid and comfort to the forces of reaction.

Central to Wittgensteinian fideism, as Nielsen characterizes it, is the idea that faith neither seeks nor needs the support of reason, and that reason cannot lead to faith or underwrite a religious way of life. He sees Wittgenstein as insisting throughout his career that religion is a matter of passionately orienting one’s life, not a matter of doctrine or philosophical ratiocination, and as committed in his later writings to holding that religion is an autonomous form of life with its own distinct language games. He interprets Wittgenstein as believing that it is nothing more than philosophical prejudice to suppose that a single standard applies to all language games, and that it is the philosopher’s job to provide a perspicuous overview, rather than a critique, of the religious form of life. In Nielsen’s account of fideism, the Wittgensteinians believe that religious language games and ways of life can be approached only internally, that is, by those with a participant’s understanding of this discourse. They think that the practice can be described and the bumps that stand in the way of understanding how it works can be removed, but nothing more. Religion,

they insist, is immune from external criticism, and what philosophical, theological, and scientific reason sees as irrational and paradoxical is part and parcel of an autonomous and coherent form of life, one that stands, like any form of life, on its own two feet.

Nielsen's most telling objection to such fideism is that it is simply not true that religion is immune to rational criticism. He argues that however compartmentalized, religion is not immune from evaluation, not because starting from the inside is no guarantee of agreement in belief. In his view, religious belief can be criticized by those who have engaged in its practices, by erstwhile insiders, and by outsiders who empathetically immerse themselves in its practices. Moreover, he sees the fideist as inconsistently claiming that religions are nothing but forms of life (to be accepted together with their associated discourse) while committing themselves to various metaphysical doctrines, most notably the view that the deity exists. One cannot, Nielsen argues, have it both ways. To treat religion as just a form of life is to jettison the metaphysical and doctrinal and to erase the distinction between being religious and being ethical. And to treat religion as involving belief in the existence of God is to forgo all the supposed advantages of Wittgensteinian fideism over old-time philosophical theism. Only by embracing a minimal metaphysical perspective can Wittgensteinian fideists distinguish their beliefs from the secularist's beliefs, but to abide by Wittgenstein's philosophical teachings, they must eschew all such perspectives.

These criticisms notwithstanding, Nielsen has come in more recent work to look somewhat more kindly on what he sees as the later Wittgenstein's and his followers' treatment of religion. He allows that they disarm some of the criticism of religion leveled by Enlightenment and Enlightenment-inspired thinkers, respects their rejection of burning-bush-type miracles and messianism, and applauds their critique of metaphysics, theoretical doctrines, and other outmoded philosophical baggage. In addition, he sees much to be admired in their existential and spiritual orientation, the values they promote, and their conception of a cultural tradition as a frame of reference. More interestingly still, he sees Wittgenstein as being more of a passionate friend of fideism than a fideist pure and simple. He stresses that Wittgenstein could not have been a fideist strictly speaking, given what he knew about our culture and the great diversity of religious and antireligious responses, and thinks Wittgenstein is better thought of as "believing that fideism is the only religious game in town, yet . . . quite unable or perhaps even unwilling to believe" (*Naturalism and Religion*, 358). Since "Wittgenstein was neither a believer nor a secularist," he notes, he was only in a "rather extended sense . . . a fideist." He could never have attached his faith—his "infinite passion" (357)—to any doctrine as he believed believers must do, the essence of religion being for him the passionate orientation of one's life in accordance with a doctrine. Had Wittgenstein been more consistent, Nielsen thinks, he would have recognized that nothing is really lost when religion is dispensed with, only houses of cards

demolished, and he would not have gone around pretending there was something he might believe if he were up to it. What the depth grammar of religious discourse shows is that religion is a distinctly human affair, at best a dressed-up form of secular ethics.

ETHICS WITHOUT GOD

For Nielsen ethics is in no need of religion—and there is no possibility of religion’s furnishing it with the sort of grounding theists seek. This is not a new point, and Nielsen mainly devotes his efforts to filling out and reinforcing what others have said. He attacks the Catholic natural law theory and the Protestant divine command theory but thinks what he says could also be put in Judaic or Islamic terms (*Atheism and Philosophy*, 197). The natural law theorist’s view of people as “physico-spiritual beings” who can apprehend the principles of morality runs afoul, he argues, both of the traditional difficulties with ethical naturalism and of the usual difficulties with metaphysical and theological thinking—mystery mongering, confusion about self-evidence and rational insight, and so forth. And the divine command view that the good resides in our unconditional and unquestioned obedience to God, he notes, falls prey to the Socratic question: Is something good because God commands it or does God command it because it is good? After examining different ways that philosophers and others have tried to wiggle out of the difficulty, he concludes that “there is no escaping the conclusion that morality presupposes neither God nor religion, indeed that religion presupposes morality” (217). There are no shortcuts. We are on our own and have to figure out what is right and wrong for ourselves. A secular humanist ethics is all we can reasonably hope for.

It is, Nielsen thinks, no good to argue that the only alternative to religious ethics is moral nihilism. Secular humanism, coupled with the method of wide-reflective equilibrium, provides a far superior morality, one that captures the good in religious ethics while dispensing with the bad—and avoiding the mystery mongering. As Nielsen sees it and attempts to show, the secular humanist is no less capable of acknowledging the importance of relieving human suffering and alienation than the religious ethicist and no less equipped to deal with the question of how we can foster our resources to face decline, disease, and death. To insist on the primacy of the ethical is not, he stresses, to deny that religion, at most, contributes to a meaningful human life and, flourishing, promotes justice, alleviates some misery, facilitates human solidarity, and so on. It is only to deny that religion is necessary or sufficient for such clearly good things. Nielsen never wavers in his belief that the secular humanist can do as well as—indeed, better than—the religious ethicist. For him ethics understood as a branch of philosophy can provide all the guidance we can expect and need. He defends modernity and argues that we can

accomplish the moral ideals of the premoderns and postmoderns insofar as they are worth pursuing.

Far worse than the technical objections under which religious ethics labors in Nielsen's view, however, is the fact that it underwrites dubious, even immoral, practices. He thinks that we need only look back and around to see that religion has a lot to answer for, since it has been used and continues to be used to justify all sorts of abuse by various authorities and fanatics. On the one hand, he reminds us, there are the atrocities of the Inquisition and witch hunts, all committed in the name of the Father. On the other hand, there is the ongoing barbarism of religious warfare and the fact that many religious people come down on the wrong side of many issues—on contraceptive methods and birth control, for instance—and justify untold pain and suffering because of what they take to be required by their religion. Nielsen allows that secularism is not blameless but believes that religion is especially open to criticism, an enormous amount of violence having been done in its name, and that secularism has a much better record of seeing and correcting its errors. In his unpublished autobiographical fragment, he notes that after he renounced religion while an undergraduate “it came to seem to [me] that most religious orientations—particularly the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic fundamentalisms—caused great harm and misery in the world,” and he continues to think “it would be a good thing if these religions, and indeed all religions (though some more urgently than others) withered away.” Unlike some critical modernists, he would never say, “Go on, believe! It does not matter!” He thinks it matters an enormous amount, not least because it can be and is enduringly hurtful.

In a conversation with Kai Nielsen, we observed that religious believers characteristically hold that their faith and belief system enables them to persevere and cope with existential and moral problems. To what extent, we asked Kai Nielsen, does his unbelief help him cope with the sorts of existential problems life throws at us? He replied, “On a personal level, my unbelief serves me well. I do not have to crucify my intellect and it helps me not to be so ethnocentric. On a political level it helps very little except to note that sometimes religion gets in the way of resolving global problems, e.g., the Catholic position on AIDS and contraception. I would agree that the Catholic option for the poor is almost anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal Washington consensus. But I think that even then it takes on too much of the tradition.”

WITTGENSTEINIAN ATHEISM

Despite his rejection of Wittgensteinian fideism, Nielsen sees himself as philosophically close to Wittgenstein, and he can fairly be regarded as attempting

to assemble a Wittgensteinian bridge between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He strikes a Wittgensteinian note when he endorses the positive spiritual and ethical spirit of Judeo-Christianity, takes religion to be at its core an ethical orientation to one's life, and emphasizes the primacy of human solidarity. But he nails his Wittgensteinian colors to the mast more firmly still in his uncompromising rejection of metaphysics and philosophical doctrine, both religious and secular; his repudiation of scientism and reductionism; and his preference for pragmatism, broadly understood, over rationalism and antirationalism. Moreover, his interest in gathering together a plurality of voices with an eye to coming to a decision about how we should proceed can perhaps be traced to some of Wittgenstein's remarks in the *Philosophical Investigations*. At any rate, Nielsen sees himself as following Wittgenstein in rejecting big-*P* philosophy in favor of piecemeal, practical small-*p* philosophy. For Nielsen, as for Wittgenstein (according to many of his followers at least), worthwhile philosophy is not a dry, detached examination of arguments so as to arrive at a solution to some abstract problem but essentially connected with our concerns and with figuring how things hang together, not least insofar as they impinge on how we can best live our lives.

In this respect Nielsen is close to his fellow atheist Richard Rorty. He agrees with Rorty about the importance of the late Wittgenstein's philosophy and endorses Rorty's view that the issue of the existence of God should no longer be on the cultural agenda because it impedes human happiness. He differs significantly from Rorty, however, over what getting religion off this agenda involves. Whereas Rorty would have us stop bothering about it and abandon the linguistic practice, Nielsen would have us continue to discuss "the religion question" for as long as it remains a live issue. He thinks talk about the deity should be dropped only after proper discussion and, even then, should be reconsidered from time to time. Whatever the philosophical fate of religion, it will, Nielsen thinks, linger as a cultural phenomenon unless properly treated. As he sees it, the religious language game is associated with a way of life, and however much one might like to see it fall by the wayside, it cannot simply be willed out of existence. Good Wittgensteinian pragmatist that he is, Nielsen takes disposing of religion to require ongoing cognitive therapy. He sees us as "living in the time of a long spiritual interregnum [when] the old faith is not yet quite dead and a firmly New World outlook . . . is still in the long process of forming" (*God, Scepticism and Modernity*, 10). What is required, in his opinion, is "a probing, non-evasive discussion of belief and unbelief, a discussion of Judaism/Christianity/Islam as over against forms of atheism." As he sees it, "These alternative frameworks need to be juxtaposed with clarity and non-evasiveness as, culturally speaking, deeply challenging and disturbing options between whole ways in which we can respond to our ensnarled lives. . . . There really is a *should* to be argued here that is actually worth bothering about and is not something which is just to be dismissed with irony" (10–11).

It is at this point in particular that Nielsen departs from Wittgenstein. He thinks that ethics and politics can be said as well as shown and holds that Wittgenstein should have recognized the possibility of responsible small-*p* philosophizing about them. Taking philosophy to be an ethically and politically engaged business, Nielsen does not hesitate to criticize our social/cultural practices and to attempt to elucidate how things are and how we should behave. For him philosophy with a small *p*—the only legitimate form of philosophy in his view—is not antithetical to social/cultural and political critique, and it is the philosopher's moral and intellectual responsibility to help things along. He deprecates Wittgenstein's remarks about philosophy's leaving everything as it is and not interfering with the use of language. Proceeding with all due care, philosophers can, Nielsen thinks, articulate pragmatic theories or positions, ones subject to revision, as well as describe our language games and practices. They should not leave the field open to the forces of reaction and obscurantism. That is irresponsible, something self-respecting philosophers should on no account permit. In Nielsen's view, philosophy shirks its responsibility if it encourages an ethically and politically irresponsible conservatism and fails to contribute to a better world. It is, he thinks, essential that philosophers come down from their ivory towers, repudiate Wittgensteinian quietism, and take their place in the public arena. In this regard he philosophizes very much in the spirit of John Dewey.

So, while Nielsen recognizes the importance of a correct description of the world for political and social action, he thinks redescribing the world and the multitude of linguistic practices in which people participate is not enough. The question of the underlying material causes has to be addressed as well. Indeed, Nielsen's strongest objection to Wittgenstein's—and Rorty's—treatment of religion is that it fails to criticize the barriers religion erects to human progress, freedom, and dignity. In wiping his hands of ethics and politics and insisting that all philosophers should do is describe forms of life and their associated discourses, Nielsen complains, Wittgenstein endorsed the status quo and stood in the way of a serious social/political critique. It is, he insists, a mistake to consign religion to the sphere of the private rather than to work to keep it in the public realm. Moreover, it is wrong to regard religion, as Rorty does, as a conversation stopper that immediately silences political and social discussion. Squeamish gestures about it are out of place. It needs and deserves to be treated in the public domain, not relegated to a denominational segment of the community. Challenging Christian and other religious apologists' claims—and their cultivation and spinning of theories—is part of what the publicly responsible philosophers should be doing, and doing for as long as necessary. Nielsen does not want—or think it possible—to drop the conversation just like that; still less would he have us look ironically on the pronouncements of the religious. He is convinced there is a *should* to be argued here and never for a moment takes Rortyan appeals to personal willpower to be enough.

"MARX'S FIGHTING SPIRIT"

As an atheistic humanist Nielsen sees his primary task as one of articulating and working out a fully secular philosophy and championing a fully secular ethics and politics. He takes an ethical orientation to require practical action and advocates that philosophers bend their energies to changing as well as understanding the world. However difficult and dispiriting the chore, he never despairs of the rationality and good sense of the religious other, and however distasteful the subject, he continues to roll up his sleeves and minister to the patient—here, too, he is a good philosophical therapist. He does not look upon reason and discussion as a waste of time, a thoroughgoing secularism being a realistic possibility, if not a sure probability. When it comes to philosophy, he is reluctant to prescribe for all and sundry, but he thinks it incumbent on him, as a philosopher, to promote a humane, secularized society, one in which human happiness and the alleviation of suffering are paramount. To this end he persists in battling against religion, with its separation the redeemed from the damned, the chosen from the unchosen, and takes issue with theological classism and the backing it provides for division, injustice, and resentment. He is not a Marxian for nothing. He thinks there are still untapped resources in the Marxist tradition, resources that he would couple with a deep concern for human rights and human decency (and whatever may be worth preserving in the religious tradition). He sees religion, as Marx did, as standing on the side of reaction and repression and thinks philosophers should attempt to “break the spell of this false consciousness and make the demystified, ideologically unraveled, and utterly secularized positive side of Christian utopian hopes the object of [their] realistic endeavors. . . . With the ideal of a classless unauthoritarian society before us, a genuine human flourishing for all can be obtained and the maxim of egalitarian justice for a materially enriched society can not only be inscribed on our banners but conditioned in our hearts” (*Atheism and Philosophy*, 53).

Nielsen differs from some Marxians, however, on the question of whether religion should be stamped out. He thinks that in addition to campaigning against religion, we need to guard against a misguided pragmatism of a sort reminiscent of Plato (in the *Republic*), which countenances legislation against it. Thus, in a recent article on Lenin for *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, he criticizes Lenin’s (occasionally) heavy-handed approach to religion and suggests, perhaps overoptimistically, that religion will wither away with “increasing and more equally distributed wealth, increasing democracy and increasing education” (485). And in a similar vein he writes in his unpublished autobiographical notes, “I think with more wealth reasonably distributed and with what Freud called a more ‘sober education’ we will rather . . . become more secularized and content to live with a disenchanted world.” While allowing that “people always will have their personal discontents and tragedies” that will not, he agrees, “go away with increased wealth and education

[and] may even intensify,” he thinks it undeniable that a comparison of “a secularized, wealthy, and more soberly educated society such as Sweden or Denmark with such religiously oriented . . . societies as the United States or South Africa where masses of people are deprived and ill-educated reveals the bulk of the people in Sweden or Denmark live better lives.” This observation leads him to conclude that “as wealth (reasonably distributed) and education get better we will have more happiness and more control over our lives.” If we end up having “the leisure to be sometimes alienated . . . that is,” he opines, “not as bad as being immiserated.”

No doubt when push comes to shove, we speak most authentically in the first person. Here, then, by way of conclusion, is Kai Nielsen in his own voice. In his unpublished autobiographical notes, he writes:

I realize from my experiences as a critic and supporter of the resistance movement against the Vietnam War that I would stand with Father Berrigan [a religious critic] rather than with Sidney Hook [an atheist critic] both then and now in opposition and resistance against American imperialism. I take this stand in spite of my philosophical sympathies with Sidney Hook. This stance of mine has nothing to do with religion but with a recognition that Father Berrigan and I would be standing on the same side of the barricades. That to my mind now as then is much more important than a concern with religion. . . . It is difficult for me to understand how any educated and reflective person who could hold on to their brains and emotions could be a religious believer. . . . But I have come to appreciate and take to heart that there are all sorts of persons on the other side of this divide and that some of them are my political and social comrades. There are things that are more important than religion. . . . Ridding ourselves as much as we can of illusions is an aim in doing philosophy. Philosophy is not only about solving or dissolving puzzles. As Wittgenstein saw, in ridding ourselves of illusions or idols we shouldn't create more illusions or idols. But here we can never be sure. We should proceed with fear and trembling. This need not, and should not, lead to quietism or despair. We need Marx's fighting spirit.

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Friedrich Nietzsche

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Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900) is often regarded as an atheist who did not take religion seriously. Yet it is ironic that Nietzsche thought more about the gods and how they function in the human psyche and in culture than many religious thinkers. Nietzsche made sharp distinctions between the positive and negative aspects of the Christian god, the Jewish god (Yahweh), the Greek gods (especially Apollo and Dionysus), and the Buddha. Further, he pondered the notion of deicide (the death of god) as well as the attributes humans project onto monotheistic and polytheistic gods. In the eyes of many humanists and religious thinkers, Nietzsche is not seen as nonreligious or atheistic; the reverse is true. Several of the most prominent theologians and psychologists of the twentieth century have regarded Nietzsche as a god-obsessed thinker, a prophetic voice that positively and radically transformed the notion of divinity in a culture headed toward nihilism. Nietzsche's main target of criticism was Christianity, and it will be the focus here.

In theological circles, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Paul Tillich are among prominent twentieth-century thinkers who were captivated by Nietzsche's religious observations. Barth did not view Nietzsche positively, Tillich and Bonhoeffer did. Tillich first read Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in a foxhole during World War I and reportedly had a conversion experience. It was then that he realized the idea of God had to change in the modern world. In *A History of Christian Thought*, Tillich wrote that if readers wanted to find out about Nietzsche's idea of God, they should look first not at his infamous phrase "God is dead," but at passages that describe the divine demonic character of life, the creative and destructive elements that are always present in every life process. Nietzsche, Tillich rightly held, asked us to affirm this life in its profound ambiguity (Tillich, 494).

According to Sigmund Freud (whose first great work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, was published the year Nietzsche died), the key to understanding Nietzsche is that he lost his father, a Protestant pastor, at an early age and was raised in an extended family of women who were pious Christians. Because Nietzsche fantasized about being Christ during puberty and labeled himself an antichrist at the end of his life, Freud reasoned that in denying God, Nietzsche was killing his father once again. Freud's colleague Otto Rank claimed that Nietzsche had a "sadistic disposition" that was accompanied by tremendous repression (quoted in Freud, 25). Although Freud agreed that there were "disturbing elements" in Nietzsche's personality, he believed that they did not constitute a neurotic illness: "The degree of introspection achieved by Nietzsche had never been achieved by anyone." Even so, said Freud, Nietzsche forever remained the moralist: A major impediment to his personal growth was that he could not "free himself of the theologian" (25–33).

According to C. J. Jung, Nietzsche was an extremely religious person who collided with his shadow. The result was a dissociation of personality because he could no longer project the divine image: Nietzsche was no atheist, but his God was dead; thus Nietzsche himself became a god. Jung stated that once God died, the considerable psychic energy that Nietzsche had invested in the reality of God's existence did not appear under the guise of a new name, such as atheism, or the state, "of which people believe, hope and expect just as much as they formerly did of God." Jung reasoned, "Happily enough for the rest of mankind, there are not many individuals as sensitive and as religious as Nietzsche," for if dull people lose the idea of God nothing happens immediately or *personally*. "But," Jung added, "socially the masses begin to breed mental epidemics, of which we have now a fair number" (103–105).

Jung's observations, recorded in 1938, are accurate. Nietzsche perceived himself as a specimen who embodied the overall climate of German culture: He declared that his own personal experience of nihilism (the death of God, which signifies the exhaustion of all meaning) would be the fate of generations to come: "The story I have to tell," Nietzsche proclaimed in 1887, "is the history of the next two centuries. For a long time now our whole civilization has been driving . . . towards a catastrophe . . . like a mighty river desiring the end of its journey, without pausing to reflect. Where we live, soon nobody will be able to exist" (*The Will to Power* [hereafter *WP*], preface 2; 57 [all citations of Nietzsche's works refer to section numbers, unless otherwise specified]). In *The Gay Science* [hereafter *GS*] Nietzsche reiterated:

The greatest recent event—that God is dead, that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. The event itself is far too great, too distant, too remote from the multitude's capacity for comprehension. . . . Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet *what* this event really means—and how much must collapse

now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality. This long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin, and cataclysm that is now impending—who could guess enough of it today to be compelled to play the teacher and advance proclaimer of this monstrous logic of terror, the prophet of a gloom and an eclipse of the sun whose like has probably never yet occurred on earth? (GS, 343)

Nietzsche's god obsession also comes to the forefront in his religious writings, especially the poetic *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (which Nietzsche regarded as a "fifth Bible"), *Toward the Genealogy of Morals*, and *The Antichrist*. From his first work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, onward, he wrestled with the gods of Greece, Judaism, and Christianity until his last productive year (1888), in which he produced *Twilight of the Idols* (also translated as "Hammer of the Gods") and *Ecce Homo*, a title Nietzsche adopted from the New Testament phrase attributed to Christ: "Behold the Man!"

LOST IN FAITH: THE YOUNG NIETZSCHE

As a child, Nietzsche was taunted by his classmates, who called him the "little pastor" or the "little Jesus." His family wholly expected young Fritz to join the clergy in adulthood, following in the footsteps of several generations of ministers. At age fourteen he went away to Pforta, a classical Lutheran boarding school that he attended for six years. He was duly confirmed at the age of sixteen, and he took his profession of faith seriously. He began expressing doubts concerning the literalness of Christian doctrine, saying that the authority of the Bible and related issues were endlessly problematic. Darwinism particularly began to trouble Nietzsche during his teens, and it continued to haunt him until his mental breakdown at age forty-four. An essay called "Fate and History" from 1862 illustrates the struggle of the seventeen-year-old Christian who desired to adhere to traditional notions of creation that humans were made in the image of God:

The doubt that power of habit, the drive towards the higher, the rejection of everything in existence . . . the doubt that humanity may have been led astray for two thousand years by a phantasm . . . —all these fight an indecisive battle until finally the pain of the experience, the sadness of the event drives our heart back into the old beliefs of childhood. But we scarcely even know whether humanity itself is only a step, a period in the universal, in evolution—whether it is not an arbitrary manifestation of God. . . . Is humanity only a means, or an end? (quoted in Hayman, 44)

In 1864, at the age of nineteen, Nietzsche was enrolled at the University of Bonn, intending to focus on the philology of Gospel criticism and New

Testament sources. Although his mother and sister expected Nietzsche to become ordained, by his twentieth year he was refusing to attend Easter services while home for the holidays. His mother, a minister's daughter, wept and quarreled with her son; his aunt intervened and explained to her that all great theologians go through periods of doubt. Because Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth, was also affected by her brother's questioning, their mother unsuccessfully tried to ban them from discussing their Christian faith. A few months later, Nietzsche wrote to his sister:

Is it then a matter of acquiring the view of God, world, and atonement in which one can feel most comfortable? . . . Do we in our investigations, search for tranquility, peace, happiness? No—only truth, even if it were to be frightening and ugly.

One last remaining question. If we had believed since youth that salvation came not from Jesus, but from another—say Mohammed—would we not have enjoyed the same blessings? Here the ways of spirits divide. If you want to find peace of mind and happiness, then believe. If you want to be a disciple of truth, then search.

Between there are many halfway positions. But it all depends on the principal aim. (*Selected Letters*, 6)

Darwinism, coupled with David Strauss's *The Life of Jesus*, in which it was argued that the Gospels were myths and the historical Jesus was a fictitious "superman" with divine attributes, became the primary reasons Nietzsche lost his Christian faith while studying theology and philology at the University of Bonn. After reading *The Life of Jesus*, Nietzsche went into a state of deep depression and dropped theology after only two semesters to concentrate solely on philology: "I craved something that would counterbalance my changing and restless proclivities, I craved an academic discipline that required aloof circumspection, logical coldness, the results of which would not instantly touch the heart" (quoted in Frenzel, 18). Nietzsche could no longer profess a belief in the existence of God. His aimlessness led him to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, which he embraced out of need, distress, and desire. Nietzsche was recognized to be a brilliant student. After graduating at age twenty-four, upon the recommendation of his prominent teacher Friedrich Fritsch he was appointed an associate professor of philology at the University of Basle in Switzerland without writing the usually mandatory dissertation. A year later he was appointed full professor. The only regular employment that Nietzsche ever had was as an academic.

Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, promoted a philology of the future and included a preface dedicated to his beloved mentor, the composer Richard Wagner. In the work, Nietzsche celebrated Greek tragedy and compared the Apollonian and Dionysian gods with modern-day Schopenhauerism and Wagnerism. Overall, the book was unscholarly and contained no footnotes. It earned the young professor disrepute in academic circles that had

eagerly anticipated the first publication of a philologist who had secured an academic chair without writing a dissertation.

Nietzsche's early *Untimely Meditations*, a collection of four essays published in 1873–1876 between the ages of twenty-nine and thirty-one, display his continued preoccupation with Darwinism, Christianity, Schopenhauer, and Wagner. Notably, the first essay, “David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer,” was a polemic against Strauss's 1872 book, *The Old Faith and the New*. According to Strauss, Jesus could no longer be an object of worship—even as a human being—because the Gospels had been discolored to such an extent that the natural Jesus could never be restored. The only thing that could be known about Jesus was that he “expected to reappear . . . in order to inaugurate the kingdom of the Messiah as foretold by him.” Since this did not occur, Strauss concluded that Jesus was not the Son of God or divine. Moreover, a mere human being with such high expectations of himself must have been an “enthusiast” (90).

Nietzsche attacked Strauss for making “a bitter mockery of the nameless sufferings of mankind” and for describing Jesus as “a visionary who would . . . hardly escape the madhouse.” He also blasted him for esteeming Darwin “as one of the greatest benefactors of mankind” (“David Strauss” [hereafter *DS*], 7). Nietzsche argued that Darwinism, without an adequate ethical foundation, was detrimental to the creation of culture. Further, while Strauss assumed that no creatures were exactly alike and that evolution depended upon the law of difference between individuals, he nonetheless admonished individuals to behave as if no differences between them existed. Strauss's philosophy of individuality, Nietzsche claimed, constituted nothing less than cultural nihilism: “Where has the moral teaching of Strauss-Darwin now gone, where has any courage whatever gone!” (*DS*, 7).

Nietzsche conceded that the old faith was dying, but the new faith, which consisted of little more than a basic piety toward the cosmos, was blasphemous: “Strauss . . . is not ashamed. We, however, turn aside for a moment to overcome our disgust” (*DS*, 6).

The point is that the young Nietzsche was torn between cultural Christianity and the historical Jesus; between Christianity's view of creation and Darwinian evolution. On the one hand, he rejected creationism but regarded Jesus as an exemplary human being. On the other hand, he adopted the empirical truth of evolutionary theory, with the understanding that a new ethic and image of humanity *had* to be constructed to preserve the dignity and worth of individuals. In his second meditation, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche wrote:

If the doctrines of sovereign becoming, of the lack of any cardinal distinction between man and animal—doctrines which I consider true but deadly—are thrust upon the people for another generation . . . no one should be surprised if the people perishes of petty egoism, ossification and greed, falls apart and ceases

to be a people. . . . To prepare the way for these creations all one has to do is to go on writing history from the standpoint of the masses. ("On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" [hereafter *HL*], 9)

According to Nietzsche, Christianity had hitherto been the power of history and the driving force moving the masses; however, to confuse power with greatness was to confuse quantity with quality. The "truest adherents" of Christianity, Nietzsche claimed, "have always called into question its worldly success and power in history rather than promoted them: for they were accustomed to place themselves outside the 'world'" (*HL*, 9):

The noblest and most exalted things make no effect whatever on the masses; the historical success of Christianity, its power in history, its tenacity and durability, happily proves nothing with respect to the greatness of its founder, for if it did it would be evidence against him: between him and that historical success there lies a very dark and earthy stratum of passion, error, thirst for power and honour. . . . Greatness ought not to depend on success. (*HL*, 9)

Nietzsche affirmed Darwin's evolutionary theory but defied it by claiming that humans *could* rise above the beasts—because they had the potential to overcome their nature. Though the instincts of humans were essentially no different from those of animals, the true representatives of humanity and culture were its "artists, saints and philosophers," who were "no longer animal" and whom nature created ("Schopenhauer as Educator" [hereafter *SE*], 5). Rejecting Christian notions of eschatology, which seek as the goal of humanity to be with God after death, Nietzsche, by age thirty, had formed a theology that found the sacred in this life and an eschatology that located the sacred within history: "The goal of humanity cannot lie in its end, but only in its highest exemplars" (*HL*, 9).

These exemplars were referred to as "free-spirits" throughout Nietzsche's earlier and later writings. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, they are called Overmen (*Übermenschen*), a term Nietzsche derived from several sources, including Goethe's *Faust*, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* by his colleague and mentor Jacob Burckhardt, and an essay of his favorite American author, Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Oversoul."

Under the early influence of Arthur Schopenhauer's work and his personal connection to Wagner and his wife, Cosima, Nietzsche held his teaching post until the age of thirty-five. Because of increasing ill health, marked by long bouts of nausea and excruciating headaches, he was forced to resign. After renouncing Schopenhauer's philosophy because it was too pessimistic, breaking off his relationship with Wagner at the beginning of 1878, and officially retiring from the university in 1879, Nietzsche received a modest pension from Basle and spent the remainder of his life as an obscure author, wandering throughout Europe with a trunk of clothes and paper to write on, in search of a place

and climate conducive to his fragile health. Until his mental collapse in Turin in the winter of 1889, he remained reclusive. He spent several months in an institution and the remaining eleven years of his life under the care of his mother and then his sister, until his death in 1900. Nietzsche's illness is not known (many believe he suffered from tertiary syphilis; a more recent interpretation is that he suffered from a brain tumor). Yet what is known is that he became a profound thinker who spent much of his writing career reevaluating the concept of god that prevailed in nineteenth-century Germany.

THE ANTICHRISTIAN

Nietzsche attacked Christianity primarily as an ethicist, not as a metaphysician making truth claims about the existence or nonexistence of God. When Nietzsche assailed the Judeo-Christian tradition, his primary targets were Christianity's notions of morality, its eschatology, and the related notion of a punitive or an all-good (meek and submissive) God, exemplified by the masses' understanding of Jesus Christ as the Redeemer. The philosopher was also preoccupied with the Lutheran state church, nationalism, and Christianity's role in the rampant anti-Semitism of his time. Nietzsche's contempt for anti-Semitism cannot be stressed enough, as it was critical to his callous critique of the Christian religion. His sister, Elisabeth, married the notorious anti-Semite Bernhard Förster, who was one of the leaders of the anti-Semitic movement in the seventies and a member of the German Seven, a group of thinkers and politicians who sought to renew Germany by excluding Jews. Elisabeth and her husband later developed an Aryan colony that Nietzsche abhorred. After Nietzsche's death in 1900, Elisabeth, who lived well into her eighties, founded the Nietzsche Archive in Weimar as a public shrine to her then famous brother. In the 1930s, she and Cosima Wagner publicly demonstrated their support for Adolf Hitler, who had been a Wagner enthusiast since youth. A major reason Nietzsche severed his ties with Wagner was the latter's obsessive hatred of Jews. Regarding Wagner, Nietzsche said with contempt in his final work, "'Christian love' as well as anti-Semitism, the will to power (to the *Reich*) as well as the *évangile des humbles* [Gospel of the humble].—Such a failure to take sides among opposites! Beyond a doubt, the Germans are idealists" (*Ecce Homo* [hereafter *EH*], "Wagner" 1).

These themes condemning Christianity recur throughout Nietzsche's letters and writings, as he regarded many Christian concepts as major obstacles to healthy cultures and to the cultivation of free spirits.

Nietzsche combined his cultural critique with his philosophy of nature, in which he acknowledged the Dionysian underground of barbaric forces. The human spirit, said Nietzsche, is not pure and separate from the senses, nervous system, or environment. Rather, spirit and body are a unity, intimately related to climate and geographical location. The salvation of humankind, Nietzsche

"The madman. Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: 'I seek God! I seek God'—As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated? —Thus they yelled and laughed."

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 125.

wrote, is not dependent "upon any kind of quaint curiosity of the theologians, but the question of *nutriment*" (*EH*, "Clever" 1).

According to Nietzsche, divinity had been wrongly sought in the concepts of God, soul, the Beyond, truth, and eternal life, whereas the basic things—nutriment, place, and climate—had been ignored. Further, moral valuations were not—and could not—be based simply on notions of reason or rationality, as Immanuel Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers had assumed; it had also to be based on human instincts. Whereas the ancient Greeks had celebrated and regulated their evil passions and natural inclinations within the usages of society and religion, Nietzsche claimed that Christianity repudiated natural drives and cut off the roots of life itself. As a consequence, these repressed instincts were not destroyed or converted into virtues. Rather, they became manifest in alternative and often more destructive forms: The savage instincts turned humans against other humans (*ressentiment*), against themselves (in what was the essence of the "bad conscience"), and often found outlets in abstract theological and philosophical concepts, such as a wrathful god who was separate from the earthly realm and fully known to humans only at the Last Judgment, after death.

Nietzsche presupposed that the concept of a punitive God was the God of Christianity and was a psychological projection of human resentment:

What? A God who loves men, provided only that they believe in him, and who casts an evil eye and threats upon anyone who does not believe in this love? What? A love encapsuled in if-clauses attributed to an almighty god? A love that has not even mastered the feelings of honor and vindictiveness? How Oriental this is! "If I love you, is that your concern?" is a sufficient critique of the whole of Christianity. (*GS*, 141)

Essentially, Nietzsche regarded Christianity as antinatural and antihistorical, having virtually no contact with reality whatsoever. It falsified history by interpreting all history prior to Jesus as the story of Christ's coming; it falsified the present by interpreting morality in terms of supernatural occurrences and consequences; it falsified the future with the promise of eternal life or damnation; and it falsified reality by interpreting God or ultimate reality as static and unchanging, when life is actually in a continual process of becoming

(*Twilight of the Idols* [hereafter *TI*], “Reason”; “World”). Christian eschatology, Nietzsche believed, is the ultimate glorification of nihilism, the deification of nothingness, the antithesis of life itself. The hope of personal immortality is nothing more than an ego trip, the false worship of the self—not God. In *The Antichrist* [hereafter *AC*], Nietzsche stated his case succinctly: “The ‘salvation of the soul’—in plain language: ‘the world revolves around *me*’” (43). In *Daybreak* [hereafter *D*], an aphorism entitled “Egoism against Egoism” expounds his point:

How many there are who still conclude: ‘life could not be endured if there were no God!’ (or, as it is put among the idealists: ‘life could not be endured if its foundation lacked an ethical significance!’). . . . The truth, however, is merely that he who is accustomed to these notions does not desire a life without them; that these notions may therefore be necessary to him and for his preservation—but what presumption it is to decree that whatever is necessary for my preservation must actually *exist!* As if my preservation were something necessary! (90)

Nietzsche desired to create a culture where human creativity flourished. The virtues he wanted upheld were not the Christian virtues of meekness, pity, and humility, but the courage, honesty, and truths that were essential to the preservation of life, not death: “Christians have never put into practice the acts Jesus prescribed for them, and the impudent chatter about ‘justification by faith’ . . . is only the consequence of the church’s lack of courage and will to confess the *works* which Jesus demanded” (*WP*, 191).

THE COLDEST OF ALL COLD MONSTERS: THE STATE

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [hereafter *Z*] the state is regarded as the coldest of all cold monsters. As the “new idol,” the monster roars: “On earth there is nothing greater than I: the ordering finger of God am I?” (*Z*, I, “On the New Idol”).

Nietzsche’s critique of cultural Christianity frequently revolves around three broad psychological and political themes that are interrelated with his understanding of power: the notion of faith or belief in relation to praxis, the individual believer in relation to the institutional state-church, and Christianity in relation to the culture at large and to non-Christians.

According to Nietzsche, in nineteenth-century Germany “really active people” were inwardly without Christianity. The “euthanasia of Christianity,” he said, was a result of its falling into the hands of the “moderate intellectual middle-class who only possess an adapted, marvelously *simplified* Christianity” (*D*, 92). Similarly to Alexis de Tocqueville, Nietzsche claimed that the genuine religious life requires leisure with a good conscience, and that it partially consists of an aristocratic feeling that views work as a disgrace. According to Nietzsche, modern Germany’s industriousness, which was noisy,

time-consuming, and “stupidly proud,” prepared and educated people, more than anything else, for unbelief. Industriousness had dissolved the religious instincts; persons had no time left for religion; and the majority were unclear as to whether religion involved another business or another pleasure:

They are not enemies of religious customs; when participation in such customs is required in certain cases, by the state, for example, they do what is required, as one does so many things—with a patient and modest seriousness and without much curiosity and discomfort. . . . Those indifferent in this way include today the great majority of German middle-class Protestants. (*Beyond Good and Evil* [hereafter *BGE*], 58)

Elsewhere Nietzsche observed that the fundamental error propagated by Protestant teachers was that all that mattered was faith, and that out of faith works would automatically proceed: “This is simply not true: but it has so seductive a sound it has confused other intelligences than Luther’s” (*D*, 22). According to the philosopher, faith cannot provide the strength needed for a deed; it is incapable of replacing the mechanism that must first be set in motion if an idea is to translate itself into action: “Works, first and foremost! That is to say, doing, doing, doing! The ‘faith’ that goes with it will soon put in an appearance—you can be sure of that!” (*D*, 22).

Nietzsche’s condemnation of Christian morality is a denouncement of what he often referred to as the morality of the weak, the morality of custom, or the “morality of the common man [that] has won” (*Toward the Genealogy of Morals* [hereafter *GM*], I, 9). This democratic morality concerned with the common good is a contradiction. From Nietzsche’s radically elitist perspective, what is common cannot be of much value. Mass morality is characterized by a passive acceptance of those aspects of tradition that manufacture conformity. It elevates modest demands and resignation to the status of godhead and favors the preservation and enhancement of the community *over* that of the individual. Occasionally, Nietzsche quipped, the so-called “teachers of the purpose of existence” decree that “there is something at which it is absolutely forbidden henceforth to laugh” (*GS*, 1).

Whereas free spirits question morality and use up convictions because they are sovereign to them, Nietzsche said, the opposite type succumb to convictions because they need to be used up. Free spirits struggle and survive in the midst of uncertainty; the others possess security and faith. Free spirits have questions; their opposites have answers. The former are individuals; the latter compose the crowd.

In *Human, All-Too-Human* [hereafter *HH*], Nietzsche combined his dry sense of humor with his pragmatic intellect to portray the free spirit’s opposite:

The bound spirit assumes a position, not for reasons, but out of habit; he is a Christian, for example, not because he had insight into the various religions and chose among them; he is an Englishman not because he decided for England;

"Although Nietzsche is generally regarded as an ascetic, one of the main sources of his criticism of Christianity was what he regarded as its unhealthy attitude toward sex. In Nietzsche's view, Christianity recommended that sexual desires 'often produce great misfortune—consequently they are evil, reprehensible.'"

—*The Will to Power*, 383

"So all that the Christian can do is to extinguish them, as embodied in Jesus' statement, 'If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out.'"

—Mark 9:47

"The logical result of this unwholesome attitude is that 'only the castrated man is a good man.'"

—*The Will to Power*, 383

rather, Christianity and England were givens, and he accepted them without having reasons, as someone who was born in wine country becomes a wine drinker. . . . Later, when he was a Christian and an Englishman, he may also have devised some reasons in favor of his habit; even if these reasons are overthrown, he, in his whole position, is not. . . . The habit of intellectual principles without reasons is called faith. (226)

Nietzsche habitually made his case against "the subtle comedy of European Christianity" (*BGE*, 62). He argued that regarding one religion as the true and only valid perspective is a transgression *both* against one's neighbor and against one's own mind: "Is what you see of the world through this window so beautiful . . . that you have lost all desire to look through any other—and even try to prevent others from doing so?" ("Assorted Opinions and Maxims" [hereafter *AOM*], 359). When Nietzsche condemned common Christian virtues such as pity or neighbor love, he was not advocating ruthlessness ("There is not enough love and kindness in the world to permit us to give any of it away to imaginary beings" [*HH*, 129]). Rather, his task resembled that of a surgeon dissecting values to uncover undesirable attributes beneath them:

Strong ages, noble cultures, consider pity, "neighbor love," and the lack of self and self-assurance something contemptible. . . . [And] we moderns, with our anxious self-solicitude and neighbor-love, with our virtues of work, modesty, legality, and scientism—accumulating, economic, machinelike—appear as a weak age. Our virtues are conditional on, are provoked by, our weaknesses. (*TI*, "Skirmishes" 37)

In *HH*, Nietzsche declared that good nature, friendliness, and courtesy of the heart had made much greater contributions to culture than the more famous expressions of the selfless drive, called pity, charity, and self-sacrifice. Moreover, he added, "there really is not much about them that is selfless" (49).

Elsewhere, Nietzsche expounded that when the concept of selfless action is closely examined, it vanishes into thin air: "Never has a man done anything that was only for others and without any personal motivation" (*HH*, 133). In typical fashion, Nietzsche overturned and twisted values, demonstrating that they are double-edged. His aphorisms are occasionally conundrums, in which the reader must work to decipher the moral or religious meaning.

Nietzsche wrote that the institutional church should be opposed to the state, and that the Germans were not spiritual enough to understand the nature of a church. Because the church provides a "structure for ruling" that secures the highest rank for the more spiritual human beings, Nietzsche reasoned that "the church is under all circumstances a *nobler* institution than the state" (*GS*, 358). However, because the distinction between church and state had ceased to exist in Germany, the result was a democratic morality, which discouraged eminent human beings and the social hierarchy. Nietzsche wanted to cultivate culture for nobles and viewed the state church, which had descended from Luther's "peasant rebellion," as a major obstacle. In "The Demon of Power," Nietzsche insisted that contemporary Germans would sacrifice even their honor for the nation's sake:

Not need, nor desire—no, the love of power is the demon of man. One may give them everything—health, nourishment, quarters . . . —they remain unhappy. . . . One may take everything away from them and satisfy this demon: then they are almost happy. . . . Luther has already said this, and better than I, in these verses: "If they take from us body, goods, honor, child, and wife: let it go—the *Reich* must yet remain to us!" Yes! Yes! the "*Reich*!" (*D*, 262)

Nietzsche described Christianity, the principle of democracy, and the state as interrelated in a powerful unified system. Morality and the concept of divinity had been placed in the hands of the masses and had consequently destroyed the order of rank within society that Nietzsche regarded as necessary to foster greatness. According to the philosopher, the Lutheran state had become God—and its lie was that the people composed it (*Z*, I, "On the New Idol"). Individuals had become mediocre, had conformed to the status quo, and the principle of equality had been elevated as an absolute, unquestionable, moral tenet in and of itself:

"Equality" as a certain factual increase in similarity, which merely finds expression in the theory of equal rights is an essential feature of decline. The cleavage between man and man, the plurality of types, the will to be oneself, to stand out—that is characteristic of every strong age. The strength to withstand tension, the width of the tensions between extremes, becomes ever smaller today; finally, the extremes themselves become blurred to the point of similarity.

All our political theories and constitutions—and the "German *Reich*" is by no means an exception—are consequences, necessary consequences, of decline; the unconscious effect of decadence has assumed mastery. (*TI*, "Skirmishes" 37)

GUILT, SIN, AND PUNISHMENT

Overall, Nietzsche believed that the primary intention behind Christian morality was not for persons to *become* more moral, but to make them *feel* as sinful as possible. Put simply, in order to be redeemed it is not necessary that one *is* sinful, only that one *feels* sinful (AOM, 225; GM, III, 16). In *Twilight of the Idols*, when comparing the law of Manu with the New Testament, Nietzsche condemned the theologians for using guilt, sin, and punishment to “improve” humankind in their attempts to create a moral world order—which is by its very means immoral. Using these dreadful coercions to improve humanity, Nietzsche jested, “sounds almost like a joke to our ears” (TI, “Improvers” 2). One need only to look in menageries to see that when animals are tamed by means of fear and wounds, they are weakened and made less harmful until they eventually become sick. Nietzsche proclaimed it the task of “we immoralists” to take Christianity’s concepts of guilt, sin, and punishment out of the world again:

The morality of *breeding* and the morality of *taming* are, in the means they employ to attain their ends, entirely worthy of one another: We may proclaim it as the supreme principle that to *make* morality, one must have the unconditional will to its opposite. This is the great, the uncanny problem which I have been pursuing the longest: the psychology of the *improvers* of mankind. Expressed in a formula one might say: *every* means hitherto employed with the intention of making mankind moral has been thoroughly *immoral*. (TI, “Improvers” 5)

Nietzsche mocked many tenets central to the Christian faith, particularly its metaphysical concepts of heaven, hell, and supernatural spirits. He ridiculed principles that the church had decreed as those at which one was “absolutely forbidden henceforth to laugh” (GS, 1).

In his later writings, Nietzsche’s tone became more serious and resentful, as he expounded his thesis that Christianity had split the world into two halves: the Christian community had placed itself on one side—on the side of truth—and the rest of the world on the other: “This was the most disastrous kind of megalomania that has yet existed on earth: little . . . prigs and liars began to claim for themselves the concepts of God, truth, light, spirit, love, wisdom, life . . . in order to define themselves against the world” (AC, 44). This process, claimed Nietzsche, was actually embodied in a conceit of being chosen playing modesty. Christians regarded themselves as the salt and meaning of the earth, and awaited the Last Judgment of nonbelievers. It was the continuation of the slavish Jewish instinct, he said, which had previously defined itself as sovereign against everything non-Jewish. Nietzsche insisted that Christianity could be understood only from the soil out of which it had grown, which was the priestly Judaism of the Diaspora. He regarded the modern-day notion of salvation as born out of weakness, mainly because it preached the damnation of non-Christians, who were, in actuality, called to the “highest things”: “The higher

man is distinguished from the lower by his fearlessness and his readiness to challenge misfortune. . . . Abundant strength wants to create, suffer, go under; the Christian salvation-for-bigots is bad music to it, and its hieratic posture an annoyance" (WP, 222). Nietzsche regarded Judeo-Christian morality as possessing a "will to revenge" cloaked beneath the modern Christian's guise of justice. This veil of morality contrasted to the "grand style of morality" as represented by "we artists" and European Jewry. In this sense, Nietzsche reasoned that Europe owed to Judaea both the "best and the worst" in terms of providing the impetus for traditional ethical values (BGE, 250).

From a psychological standpoint, Nietzsche hypothesized that Christianity had, both publicly and privately, been reduced to a "phenomenon of the consciousness," and that for all practical purposes it had been negated. It had become a religion of the head that defended itself not by works, but by beliefs: "If the uprooting of Christianity begins in the head then it is obvious where it will first start to disappear: in precisely the place where it will also defend itself most strenuously" (AOM, 97). On the one hand, this psychological defense mechanism had led to individual and communal self-interest designed to promote individual and communal happiness: "Now the *belief* that we *love* our enemy, for example—even when it is only belief, fancy, and in no way a psychological reality (is not love, that is to say)—undoubtedly makes us *happy* so long as it really is believed" (AOM, 96). On the other hand, it leads to religious bigotry and fanaticism because the "point of honesty in deception" is that people will believe something is true *if* it is evidenced that others believe in it firmly ("Christian, too, is a sense of cruelty towards oneself and all those who think differently; the will to persecute") (AC, 21).

Nietzsche regarded Christianity as a sense of cruelty toward oneself because the individual, as subordinate to the institution, is fearful of calling its power in history into question, mainly because the power of the institution lies in its authority to express its dogmas and doctrines in a manner that promises individual fulfillment. Persons in fear are unable honestly to question themselves or their religion. Therefore the virtues Nietzsche espoused, such as courage, creativity, and intellectual freedom, are annihilated: "They have called 'God' what was contrary to them and gave them pain. . . . And they did not know how to love their god except by crucifying man" (Z, II, "On Priests"). Further, Christian dogmas and doctrines are not employed in the service of the society at large; in large measure, they are used to separate the believing community from the society at large: "Christianity has done its utmost to close the circle and declared even doubt to be sin.—And notice that all this means that the foundation of belief and all reflection on its origin is likewise sinful" (D, 89). Nietzsche tried to break this "circle of dangerous repetition" by pushing toward the other extreme: "Christianity is not tied to any of the impudent dogmas that have adorned themselves with its name: it requires neither the doctrine of a personal God, nor that of sin, nor that of immortality, nor that

of redemption. . . and even less of a Christian ‘natural science.’ Christianity is a *way of life*, not a system of beliefs” (WP, 212).

Nietzsche viewed the everyday Christian of his time as “a pitiful figure.” He prefaced the statement with “Assuming that he believes at all” (HH, 116). The mass Christianity that Nietzsche opposed was, he claimed, the total inversion of the Gospel of Jesus, which consisted of an existential disposition—not a set of creeds. Christianity, when understood as a system of beliefs, not only resulted in a culture full of repressed individuals; socially, it led to religious bigotry—particularly to the “dangerous national hostilities” that, Nietzsche wrote in HH, consisted of the literary misconduct that had led “the Jews to the slaughterhouse, as scapegoats for every possible public and private misfortune” (475). In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote that he “never met a German who was well-disposed toward the Jews,” and that anti-Semitic loudmouths should be expelled from the country (251). In *The Will to Power*, during his last productive year, Nietzsche continued to insist that Christianity had degenerated into German nationalism with a streak of vengeance: “The Christian takes up again all the activities he has forsworn (—self-defense, judgment, punishment, oath-taking, distinguishing between nation and nation, contempt, wrath—). The church is . . . as much a symptom of the triumph of the anti-Christian as the modern state, modern nationalism—The church is the barbarization of Christianity” (213).

ATONEMENT

In the second essay of *Toward the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche explored in detail the origin of “guilt,” “bad conscience,” “ascetic ideals,” and the like. chided Christendom for its traditional (unnatural) teachings on sex and its (unnatural) elevation of ascetic ideals. For instance, Nietzsche found it difficult to conceive how the natural process of sex could be considered “unholy,” and how the (unnatural) process of starving the body—or fasting—could be sanctified. Yet most of all, he was preoccupied with the power of Christendom’s capacity to inflict ideals such as guilt on the minds of the masses, rendering them into bondage, and in dire need of salvation for their sins.

Nietzsche asserted that mass psychological states such as faith (which eases the psyche) and guilt (which torments the psyche) are imaginary illusions made manifest and promoted by “vengeful priests” through social, institutional, and political spheres. Again, one must first “feel” guilty in order to be redeemed. When one follows Nietzsche’s train of thought in *Toward the Genealogy of Morals*, the following scenario unfolds: Before Christ came, humanity felt guilty about being in debt to the deity; thus the arrival of Christ-god (as payment) should have solved the problem of humanity’s guilt. However, Nietzsche contended, this did not happen. The backwardness of

Christianity is that it must now *first inflict* guilt on humanity in order to provide the necessity for salvation in Christ (which is needed to perpetuate the institution). That is, before Christ, humanity “felt” guilty; after Christ, humanity *still* feels guilty because the “priests” need to inflict guilt upon humanity to fuel their power. This logic is perhaps what is behind Nietzsche’s somewhat enigmatic statement “Christianity came into existence in order to lighten the heart; but now it has to burden the heart first, in order to be able to lighten it afterward” (*HH*, 119). It also sheds light on why he continually praised the gods of Greece for taking upon themselves the “guilt,” and why he stated that Jesus, although he wanted to abolish guilt, nonetheless died for *his* guilt, not the guilt of others (*AC*, 27). With the advent of the Christian God, Nietzsche said, the maximum feeling of guilty indebtedness was attained on earth. If we embark upon the reverse course, it is probable that with the decline of faith in the Christian God there will also be a decline in humanity’s feeling of guilty indebtedness to its origin: “Atheism and a kind of *second innocence* belong together” (*GM*, II, 20).

Prehistorically, Nietzsche said, the origin of the bad conscience arose when the human instinct for freedom and spontaneity was suppressed by external constraints, such as the state. As natural human instincts were inhibited from being discharged, they turned inward; this process is what Nietzsche regarded as the internalization of man: “Hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change, in destruction— . . . : *that* is the origin of the ‘bad conscience’” (*GM*, II, 16). Eventually repressed instincts (rooted in self-denial) found increased pleasure in suffering by making others suffer. The so-called virtues of self-denial, self-abnegation, and pity are not, Nietzsche insisted, rooted in nobility, which is first and foremost self-affirming; they are tied to cruelty and the will to self-maltreatment. Nietzsche further expounded that guilt and the bad conscience had reached its most “terrible heights” through humanity’s awareness of being in debt to the deity, the divine creditor (*GM*, II, 20), which grew as the concept of God and the feeling for divinity increased over millennia. Because humans felt guilty and fearful of God, they pushed these feelings back into themselves and their bad conscience, psychologically desiring a “final discharge”—but unable to secure it (*GM*, II, 21). Christianity’s “stroke of genius” was to relieve tormented humanity from a guilty conscience through atonement theories: God sacrifices himself for humanity’s guilt; God (as divine creditor) makes payment (to himself) out of love for the debtor (the guilty human) (*GM*, II, 21). This economic explanation, which demystifies the atonement, Nietzsche claimed, should put an end once and for all to the question of how the Holy God originated (*GM*, II, 23):

You will have guessed *what* has really happened here, *beneath* all this: that will to self-tormenting, that repressed cruelty of the animal-man made inward and scared back into himself, the creature imprisoned in the “state” so as to be

tamed, who invented the bad conscience in order to hurt himself after the more natural vent for this desire to hurt had been blocked—this man of the bad conscience has seized upon the presupposition of religion so as to drive his self-torture to its most gruesome pitch of severity and rigor. Guilt before *God*: this thought becomes an instrument of torture to him. He apprehends in “God” the ultimate antitheses of his own ineluctable animal instincts; he ejects from himself all his denial of himself, of his nature, naturalness, and actuality, in the form of an affirmation, as something existent, corporeal, real, as God, as the holiness of God, as God the Judge, as God the Hangman, as the beyond, as eternity, as torment without end, as hell, as the immeasurability of punishment and guilt. (GM, II, 22)

Nietzsche said that there are nobler uses for the invention of gods than the “self-crucifixion and self-violation of man” that had been attained in Europe over two millennia. He pointed to the Greek gods, who warded off the bad conscience by taking upon themselves not only the punishment, but also the guilt (GM, II, 23).

JESUS, PETER, PAUL, AND MARY

Although Nietzsche used an arsenal of weapons against Christianity, aside from *The Antichrist* his remarks concerning Jesus can virtually be counted on one hand. Nietzsche often appealed to Jesus to support his personal conviction that works, not faith, is the way of the Christian life. In *The Antichrist*, he regarded Jesus as the “only Christian,” a free spirit, and one who was free from *ressentiment*: “There was only *one* Christian and he died on the cross” (AC, 39). Nietzsche also regarded Jesus as an “idiot” and a “political criminal” in an absurdly antipolitical community. In his previous work, *Toward the Genealogy of Morals*, he linked Jesus to the despised “Jewish slave revolt” in morality, a revolt that had two thousand years behind it: “*Three Jews*, as is known, and *one Jewess* (Jesus of Nazareth, the fisherman Peter, the rug weaver Paul, and the mother of the aforementioned Jesus, named Mary). This is very remarkable: Rome has been defeated [by Judea] beyond all doubt” (GM, I, 7; 16). Overall, his scrutiny of Jesus is mixed: He regarded him as having a warm heart but viewed him as politically naive and as responsible for Christian concepts Nietzsche derided. In an excerpt that illustrates Nietzsche’s ideal political figure, he spoke about the powerful position of rulers that master their own benevolence and pity: “*the Roman Caesar with Christ’s soul*” (WP, 983).

In *Human, All-Too-Human*, Nietzsche regarded the noblest human being as Jesus of Nazareth. However, in the following work, *Daybreak*, he questioned Jesus’ psychological disposition: “He who sets such store on being believed in that he offers Heaven in exchange for this belief, and offers it to

everyone, must have suffered from fearful self-doubt and come to know every kind of crucifixion: otherwise he would not purchase his believers at so high a price" (67). As evidenced in this passage, Nietzsche believed that Jesus had taught the concepts of heaven and hell—doctrines Nietzsche abhorred. However, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche defended Jesus by attributing his erroneous teachings to his youth: "Believe me, my brothers! He died too early; he himself would have recanted his teaching, had he reached my age. Noble enough was he to recant" (I, "On Free Death"). Because Jesus has failed to hold holy the love of life and earth—and has forsaken it for death and the beyond—Zarathustra offers himself as a sacrifice: "Thus I want to die myself that you, my friends, may love the earth more for my sake; and to earth I want to return that I may find rest in her who gave birth to me" (I, "On Free Death").

Clearly, Nietzsche's battle was not with Jesus. Most often, his polemic against early Christianity is directed at Paul, "the greatest of all apostles of vengeance" (AC, 45); his assault on the Christian Middle Ages is aimed at Aquinas (full of *ressentiment*) and Luther, who had "all the vengeful instincts of a shipwrecked priest" (AC, 61); and his fury against modern Christendom in Europe is unleashed at German nationalism and Wagner, "the bigot at the top" (EH, "Clever," 5). According to Nietzsche, it is of profound significance that the arrival of Wagner coincided in time with the arrival of the Reich: "Both events prove the very same thing: obedience and long legs" (*The Case of Wagner*, 11).

GOD IS DEAD

On the whole, Nietzsche regarded Christianity and the Lutheran state church as major obstacles to the advancement of a healthy culture and healthy humans primarily, but not solely, for the following reasons: Its emphasis on certainty strangles the intellect and renders the skeptical capacity of humans impotent—to the point where questioning is regarded as immoral in itself. Its emphasis on the afterlife devalues life on earth. Its God—who is vengeful, separate from nature, and fully known only at the time of death, is virtually irrelevant (and thus dead) to life and also leads believers to make the moment of death the ultimate goal of life (which is nihilism par excellence). The conception of Jesus as a meek Savior who redeems humankind leads to passive acceptance and triumphalism. Zarathustra sighs, "He whom they call Redeemer has put them in fetters. . . . Would that someone would yet redeem them from their redeemer" (Z, II, "On Priests"). Nietzsche was also very concerned about the concepts of guilt and punishment, which had become central to the interpretation of existence. And lastly, the Christianity of Wagner and Elisabeth, which served as an archetype of cultural Christianity, led Nietzsche to equate the Christian religion with "the damnable German anti-Semitism" and nationalism (EH, appendix 4).

When Nietzsche first proclaimed the death of God in *The Gay Science*, he was not making a theological statement about the reality of God's existence. Nor was he killing his human father once again, as Freud and other psychoanalysts have theorized. Rather, his proclamation was based on his empirical observation of nineteenth-century German culture. Nietzsche saw the demise of Christianity, the demise of morality, and thus the death of religion as a cultural and existential fact. Even though Nietzsche lived in a Christian nation, he saw it as fundamentally immoral and faithless—and thus, by all traditional religious standards, irreligious. Albert Camus's remark that Nietzsche "did not form a project to kill God" but "found Him dead in the soul of his contemporaries" (68) illustrates this view, as does the Macmillan *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: "Nietzsche recognized . . . that as a matter of historical fact, atheism was ushering in an age of nihilism" (Olson, 515).

"Nietzsche said, 'God is dead.' . . . Nietzsche was a deep thinker, and when Nietzsche said, 'God is dead,' a hundred years ago, it was a terrible thought to Nietzsche. It was a tragedy to him, and the last 12 years of his life he spent in a mental institution. But some of these men [*sic*] have pronounced in our generation: 'God is dead'—and they're jumping up and down on His grave . . . shouting, 'Hallelujah! God is dead!'"

—Rev. Billy Graham, "God Is Not 'Dead,'" *U. S. News & World Report*, April 25, 1966.

In *The Gay Science*, when the madman lights his lantern in "the bright morning hours" and runs to tell the people of God's death, he is making an empirical observation and an ethical statement. In opposition to the traditional Christian charge that demonized the Jews as agents of the devil for killing Christ, Nietzsche ascribed the murder of God to Christians, to the church, and to himself:

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" He cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. . . . Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder?

"How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?" . . .

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way. . . . This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves."

It has been related further that on the same day the madman forced his way into several churches and there struck up his *requiem aeternam deo*. Led out and called to account, he is said always to have replied nothing but: “What after all are these churches now if they are not the tombs and sepulchers of God?” (GS, 125)

Nietzsche conceded that his religious tradition was totally and hopelessly corrupt. His endeavor is paradoxical: He sought to replace and destroy Christianity—which he claimed, in principle, did not even exist but, in reality, still remained. Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity describes a modern-day civilization that had gone astray and that suffered terribly from a religious neurosis. He foresaw that the crisis of nihilism, or the loss of meaning and value previously found in traditional worldviews, would likely result in a higher or lower species of humanity. The death of god would propel humanity forward: beyond good and evil, beyond the first innocent man, Adam, and beyond *Zarathustra*’s despised, barbaric “last man.”

Theoretically, it makes little sense to describe Nietzsche as “atheistic” or “irreligious,” unless these terms refer to Christianity and the Christian god. It is not accurate to say that Nietzsche did not “believe” in god; rather, he believed in some gods and not others, favoring the gods in relation to their actual *practical* effects on human life, culture, and creativity. “Could you create a god?” Zarathustra asks. And he answers, “Then be silent about all gods.” Nietzsche, however, was never silent about the gods, stressing that religion and politics are united—sometimes even within a single soul—and that once humans cease to create, they cease to be human.

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Madalyn Murray O'Hair

Frank R. Zindler

INTRODUCTION

Madalyn Murray O'Hair (1919–1995) was an atheist activist who fought for the civil liberties of atheists and defended Thomas Jefferson's "wall of separation" between government and religion. She argued that the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States guaranteed not only freedom *of* religion, but freedom *from* religion as well. Her slogan "Atheism—the ultimate liberation" reflected her view that liberation of the human mind was the most fundamental of all liberation struggles. She is perhaps best known for the landmark case *Murray v. Curlett*, decided on June 17, 1963, in which the United States Supreme Court ruled in her favor, declaring that forced prayer and Bible reading in the public schools of America was unconstitutional. When the Court issued its ruling, although her case had been filed prior to *Abington School District v. Schempp* and carried a lower docket number, it combined her case with the later case and issued its ruling under the latter name. So great was the public outcry after this decision that *Life* magazine (June 19, 1964) dubbed her "the most hated woman in America."

Mrs. O'Hair was a tireless debater, lecturer, and talk show guest, appearing on over a thousand radio and television shows and lecturing and debating on every major college and university campus in America. Eventually, she created her own atheist radio and television series, founded the magazine *American Atheist* and the *American Atheist Newsletter*, and did everything in her power to get the message of atheism out to the public and to let isolated atheists throughout the nation know that they were not alone.

Author of more than a dozen books, nearly a hundred pamphlets, and countless magazine articles and leaflets, she became the best-known atheist in

the country and enjoyed a wide international reputation among freethought groups around the world. In partnership with Lavanam in India, she founded United World Atheists, an organization intended to facilitate cooperation among freethought groups of every nation. In addition to being a writer of books, she also was an avid collector of atheist books, pamphlets, and ephemera, collecting many rare, last-existing copies of works that were the solitary survivors of censors' fires. She amassed what arguably became the largest library of freethought literature in the Americas. It formed the nucleus of the Charles E. Stevens American Atheist Library and Archives, now located at 225 Cristiani Street, Cranford, New Jersey 07016.

Shortly after her 1963 victory in the Supreme Court, Madalyn O'Hair founded the Society of Separationists, Inc., which eventually became American Atheists, Inc. With these organizations as her legal base, being a lawyer she became a tireless litigant in case after case where the wall of separation was being breached. Until the time that she and her family were murdered in 1995, she was continuously involved in First Amendment litigation. More than a decade later, she remains one of America's best-known atheists.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in Pittsburgh on April 13, 1919, to John Irvin and Lena (Scholle) Mays, Madalyn Mays (later Murray, then O'Hair) was baptized into the Presbyterian Church without her consent—but also without any lasting effect, according to her own report. While yet a child in Ohio, she read through the entire Christian Bible before enrolling as a student at Rossford High School, in Rossford, Ohio. She claimed to have read the entire book in less than a week and was able easily to come to the conclusion that it was a morally ugly fable—a story that fortunately couldn't possibly be true. In later life, she loved to chide religious critics with the ironic challenge: "Read your Bible! It will make you an atheist!"

After graduating from high school, she completed a BA degree at Ashland College in 1948 and obtained a law degree from South Texas College of Law in 1953. Although she was a lawyer and a leading authority on First Amendment law, she never obtained a law license and never practiced law. She claimed the reason was that she refused to swear a religious oath to obtain the license.

Although her marital history remains unclear, it appears to be certain that the father of her older son, William J. Murray III—the ostensible plaintiff in the landmark school-prayer case—was William J. Murray, Jr., an army officer she met in Italy during her service in World War II. Her first son was born on May 15, 1946. Although he would become his mother's "right-hand man" in the atheist organizations she founded, he ultimately renounced both his mother

and atheism and became an evangelical Christian actively working *against* the separation of church and state.

Jon Garth Murray, O'Hair's second son, was born on November 16, 1954. In their biographies of Madalyn Murray O'Hair, both Bryan F. Le Beau and Ann Rowe Seaman present evidence that his father was a New Yorker named Michael Fiorillo. Years later, in 1986, when his mother retired as president of American Atheists, Inc., and became "Founder and Director Emeritus," he would become the director of his mother's flagship organization—a position he would hold until the end of his short life in 1995.

In *An Atheist Epic*, O'Hair vividly portrayed her initial reactions to learning that enforced prayer was being conducted at her son's school:

Woodbourne Junior High School was a large, new school built in the colonial style, with red brick and white trim. From the outside one could see the sweep of colonial America—which I felt was paralleled by the level of education on the inside, still dominated by standards two hundred years old and ridden with authoritarian and religious dwarfs of that prior era. . . .

We entered a side door . . . and we started a brisk walk down the labyrinth of corridors. It was just a few moments after 9:00 a.m. and pupils were in their homerooms. Suddenly, a swell of young voices engulfed us. As we passed one open classroom door after another, we heard the recitation, in unison, of the Lord's Prayer. We were caught up in a moment that transcended time, and we seemed to walk forever hearing only the waves of prayer from medieval ages of man, and the steady, even-paced click of our leather heels on the tiled floors as we walked down another and yet another corridor.

I turned to Bill [Murray]. "My Gawd, what was that?"

He said, "Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, Son of Mary, sired by the Holy Ghost, descendant of David, the bearer of the Holy Word, Redeemer of Life, and the Gate by which we enter Heaven and are saved, in whose Grace we walk, is praised every morning in the public schools." (5)

In spite of her desire to rid both her son and the nation of this kind of religious coercion, O'Hair had personal issues to consider:

Before I could actually file the case, I had another matter to consider. That was Jon Garth. He was five years old when it began. Where he had once played happily in the alley with his friends, now suddenly he had no one. I watched him out the windows as he stubbornly refused to be turned away. . . . He sat on our step and watched them deliberately playing in front of our yard, deliberately refusing to have him, deliberately rebuffing. . . .

I thought that he had to have a companion and I went and bought a cat. The lure of that kitten brought the children back. Mothers could warn kids about Garth, but they could not curb the natural fondness of children for a small, cuddly kitten. The kitten sometimes got away and Garth would hustle out of the yard to recapture it. It was only several days later that I called him to come in

and he left the cat there being patted by everyone. I did not notice immediately. It was a few moments he was in the house before he needed to go back and get the cat. It was gone and so were the children. I smoothed it over, and reassured him that the cat would be back. I would never have dreamed that it would come back so quickly. He had been tucked in bed for the evening and it was dark outside when the door bell rang. I went to answer it. I could see a male figure going briskly off between the cars. I wondered what he had wanted. I did not know if I should step out on the porch or not, but then I turned on the porch lights. The cat was there. Its neck had been wrung. (141–142)

Nevertheless, she bravely went forward with her lawsuit.

In 1974 O'Hair adopted her granddaughter, William's daughter, Robin Eileen Murray, who received the hyphenated name Robin Eileen Murray-O'Hair. An extremely precocious child, after graduating from the University of Texas she became editor of the magazine *American Atheist*, as well as her grandmother's constant companion, nurse (after O'Hair developed diabetes), and focus of hope.

After O'Hair's defining triumph in the United States Supreme Court in 1963, as already noted she founded what was to become American Atheists, Inc., an organization dedicated to defending the civil liberties of atheists and to protecting the wall of separation between government and religion.

In the early years after that case, she and both her sons worked tirelessly to build an organization that ultimately would have its own building, printing press, catalog of publications ranging from newsletters to books, and presence in the broadcast media—including radio and cable television—and on what was to become the Internet.

After the defection of her elder son "Bill" in 1977, O'Hair, Jon—now always called "Garth" in the family—and Robin bonded together to work for each other and for the cause of atheism. Working often until midnight at the American Atheist Center in Austin, Texas, seven days a week, the trio wrote books, edited magazines and newsletters, produced radio and television programs, planned and drafted First Amendment lawsuit after lawsuit, curated the Charles E. Stevens American Atheist Library and Archives, and kept up a rigorous schedule of lectures, debates, and appearances on commercial radio and television.

Living and working together in what psychologically were tight quarters was not easy or without instability. Three highly charged personalities, they were like mutually repellent protons in an unstable nucleus—threatening to fly apart at any moment but held together by the invisible binding forces of common purpose and consanguinity. New staff at the Atheist Center would often be alarmed—even frightened—by the shouting matches that often erupted among the three principals, but such emotional outbursts were always short-lived. One moment, a fly on the wall might think they were about to kill each other; an hour later they might be found enjoying a late-night hamburger

Atheist Declaration in *Murray v. Curlett*

Your petitioners are Atheists, and they define their beliefs as follows. An Atheist loves his fellow man instead of a god. An Atheist believes that heaven is something for which we should work now, here on earth, for all men together to enjoy. An Atheist believes that he can get no help through prayer, but that he must find in himself the inner conviction and strength to meet life, to grapple with it, to subdue it and enjoy it. An Atheist believes that only in a knowledge of himself and knowledge of his fellow man can he find the understanding that will help to a life of fulfillment.

He seeks to know himself and his fellow man, then, rather than to know a god. An Atheist believes that a deed should be done instead of a prayer said. An Atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty banished, war eliminated. He wants man to understand and love man. He wants an ethical way of life. He believes that we cannot rely on a god or channel action into prayer, nor hope for an end of troubles in a hereafter. He believes that we are our brothers' keepers; but more important, we are the keepers of our own lives; that we are responsible persons and that the job is here and the time is now.

—From the records of *Murray v. Curlett* (1963), the case in which the United States Supreme Court ruled that forced prayer and Bible reading in public schools was unconstitutional

at Fudrucker's and regaling each other with hate mail received from Christians earlier in the day.

For many years, persistent rumors had circulated that O'Hair had embezzled millions of dollars from her organizations and had squirreled them away in Switzerland or some other offshore repository. No matter that those organizations were always so close to bankruptcy that O'Hair often had to use her military and Social Security pensions to help pay the staff! She was, after all, an atheist, and how could an atheist be trusted?

Somehow, rumors of O'Hair's millions found their way to a man who had committed his first murder while yet a teenager and had served time for other violent crimes as well: David Roland Waters. Out of prison once again, he found his way to the American Atheist Center in Austin and sought employment. Presenting a completely bogus résumé, he started work as general factotum and quickly showed that he could do anything needed to keep the office running—from setting type and repairing the printing press to cleaning up the kitchen and maintaining the computers and video equipment. When the Murray-O'Hair family had to leave the office for a week or so to defend themselves

and their corporations in a trial to be held in a federal court in San Diego, he became temporary office manager, charged with holding down the fort in their absence.

As soon as the family was gone, Waters hacked into the office computers and cracked the various bank accounts of the corporation, stealing tens of thousands of dollars of the operating funds. He cracked the safe as well, stealing over a hundred thousand dollars in bonds. When the Murray-O'Hairs returned to the office unexpectedly early, they found that the staff had been dismissed and Waters was nowhere to be seen. O'Hair quickly found incontrovertible evidence that Waters had robbed her corporation, but when she took the evidence to the Austin police, they would not take any action against Waters. Only weeks later—after atheists all over the country had faxed letters and petitions of protest to the chief of police, the sheriff, the county prosecutor, and a judge—was David Waters brought in for questioning. After pleading guilty to the thefts, he was released and was told he should repay the stolen money as he was able. It was now clearly open season for hunting atheists.

While rummaging through the computers looking for bank accounts, Waters had found a million-dollar account in a bank in New Zealand. Having been hired about a year after American Atheists had completed its well-publicized fund drives to amass a million-dollar trust fund—it had been hoped that the earnings from the fund would pay for the day-to-day operations of the organization—Waters naturally must have concluded that he had found one of the fabled offshore accounts he had been seeking. The New Zealand account, however, was not hackable, and Waters had to delay its acquisition to a later date.

That date appears to have been Sunday, August 27, 1995. On that day, Waters knew, the Murray-O'Hairs would be working at the Atheist Center alone, with no other staff on the premises. Accompanied by fellow ex-con Gary Karr and petty crook Danny Fry—and indirectly assisted by girlfriends and another ex-con, Gerald Lee "Chico" Osborne—David Waters kidnapped the trio, held them hostage for a month, and extorted over \$600,000 from them. Jon Garth Murray was forced to withdraw money from the New Zealand trust fund and have it wired to a coin dealer in San Antonio, Texas, and converted into gold coins. When the kidnappers obtained the coins, they killed the "First Family of Atheism"—apparently by strangulation—dismembered their bodies so they could be stuffed into small plastic barrels, tried to cremate them, and then buried them on the Camp Wood ranch near San Antonio.

The available evidence makes it appear that after the murders, the criminal crew temporarily stored most of the gold in a rental storage unit and went out to celebrate at a nearby nightspot. Apparently, Danny Fry developed a loose tongue when drinking. Not realizing that right behind him was a small gang of petty thieves, he revealed enough information about the gold to cause them to leave the bar, find the storage unit, pick the lock, and make off with almost all the stolen gold. Some time later, Fry's nude body was found—without his

head and hands—on the muddy bank of the East Fork of the Trinity River in Dallas County. The body would not be identified until three and a half years later.

When the Murray-O'Hairs had been taken from the American Atheist Center, they were forced to leave a handwritten note on the front door saying that they had been called away on important business. Soon rumors began to circulate about their disappearance. In order to keep American Atheists, Inc., operating, the board of directors elected Ellen Johnson of New Jersey acting director during the absence of Jon Murray. When she discovered the \$600,000 missing from the New Zealand trust fund and reported the theft, widespread claims circulated that the Murray-O'Hairs had absconded with the money and were hiding in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, or even Bulgaria or Romania. But no police agency would investigate their disappearance, even when O'Hair's estranged, Christian son William, tried to get the Austin police department to do so. It would be January 2001 before the dismembered remains of Madalyn Murray O'Hair, Jon Garth Murray, and Robin Eileen Murray-O'Hair—along with the head and hands of Danny Fry—would be exhumed from their shallow graves on the desolate Texas ranch. Only then could it be proved that the famous atheists had not been traitors to their own cause or robbers of their own corporations.

No one was ever charged with murder in the case, but David Roland Waters and Gary Karr were sent to prison on lesser charges. According to a disputed *Wikipedia* article on Madalyn Murray O'Hair, Waters died in a federal prison exactly 666 days after being sentenced.

PERSONALITY AND CHARACTER

There are a few things on which both enemies and devoted friends of Madalyn Murray O'Hair agree. All agree that she was brilliant, boisterous, high-strung, and a prototypical extrovert. All concur that she was tirelessly devoted to the cause of advancing atheism and attaining freedom from religion for all who desired it. All admit that she was a "difficult person," that she was quick to anger, perhaps overly suspicious of everyone else's motives, and made enemies easily.

Some critics in the atheist and freethought community say that she was too brash, abrasive, and openly atheistic to be effective in the fight against the union of church and state. Her defenders, however, point out that her primary goal was civil rights for atheists and that separationist goals were sometimes secondary. As for her combative, attack-dog-like confrontations with religion, defenders argue that that was the approach needed at a time when almost all atheists were closeted and dared not come out of their closets. Supporters say that by presenting a fearless—even aggressive—image to the public, she served as a beacon of hope to isolated, timid, and frightened atheists all over the country.

"No God ever gave any man anything, nor ever answered any prayer at any time—nor ever will."

—Madalyn Murray O'Hair (from a poster in the office of American Atheists, Inc.)

Also, it must not be forgotten that in the late 1950s the ghost of aggressively antiatheistic McCarthyism still stalked the land. An atheist could not get on the radio or television to discuss the philosophy of atheism. An atheist voice could be broadcast only if it were making news. Because of her flamboyant style and her ability to turn simple actions into events, O'Hair was continuously in the news. She launched the career of Phil Donahue by guesting with him on his inaugural broadcast and added excitement to a number of Johnny Carson's shows. Because O'Hair *created* news, and because she did everything openly as an atheist, the philosophy that previously had not dared to speak its name was at last out in the open and could be talked about and thought about.

Madalyn O'Hair's detractors have made much of her often vulgar or coarse habits of speech, and even her admirers were often appalled by her "cussing." To her, however, the use of such vulgar language was not at all gratuitous but a logical consequence of her theory of the relation between religious language and magical modes of thought.

She often argued, for example, that to believe there actually *is* such a thing as a *curse* is to believe that certain words, used in a certain way, can have magical power to do harm. To believe that other words, used in a different way, to benefit or *bless* someone is equally a belief in the magical power of words. Similarly, if the Third Commandment (according to the Protestant counting system)—"Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD your God in vain"—is to be understandable at all, it must mean that the name Yahweh (deliberately mispronounced *Jehovah* by Christians, substituted with *Adonai* by Jews, and written as *LORD* in most English translations of the Hebrew Bible) is a "name of power." That is to say, it is a name of *magical* power that must not be used for frivolous or evil purposes. *Yahweh* was the magical word used in both cursings and blessings. So potent is that name believed to be that Leviticus 24:16 commands, "Whoever utters the Name of the LORD [Yahweh] shall be put to death."

In Christianity, however, this name of power has largely been superseded by the name Jesus—as in the hymn that begins "All hail the power of Jesus' name." O'Hair delighted in scandalizing Christian audiences by telling them that the quintessential conjuror's spell, "hocus-pocus," derives from a mishearing of the Latin phrase "Hoc est corpus" (This is my body), spoken too rapidly by a Catholic priest during the Eucharistic part of the mass. (At that

point it is believed that bread is being magically “transubstantiated” into the actual flesh of Christ.)

O'Hair argued that swearing the oath “So help me, God” also involves magical religious language, and she fought all her life to eliminate oath swearing from judicial proceedings. Instead of invoking the magical word *God*, she sought to replace oaths with a solemn promise: “With knowledge of the pains and penalties of perjury, I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.”

According to her theory, the distance between swearing in the judicial sense and swearing in the vulgar sense is very small. Both types of swearing are predicated upon the belief that certain words are more than mere pressure waves in air or patterns of ink on paper. Both involve verbal taboos, and *taboo* is a religious, magical concept.

As long as religionists in America could enforce verbal taboos of any sort, she reasoned, atheists would never be free from religion. What to do? By deliberately violating all language taboos, she sought to desensitize her public to all “words of power”—in other words, to drain such words of their emotive force. Although even her closest friends admit that her desensitization battles did not succeed during her lifetime, there was one word for which her efforts seem not to have been in vain. That is, of course, the “A word”—*atheist*—which she always spelled with a capital A.

When she began her public career, virtually no one dared to be identified as an atheist. The word was used only pejoratively, and even a dictionary of the day gave “an evil person” as a possible meaning for the term *atheist*. To be an atheist was to be a communist, and to be a communist was to be a traitor. In Maryland, it was not even possible at first to use the word *atheist* in a corporate name. Her first corporation was named Other Americans, later renamed Society of Separationists and, finally, American Atheists, Inc. By the time of her death in 1995, however, the word *atheist* had largely lost the negative connotations—largely because of the efforts of Madalyn Murray O'Hair (and of the large number of associates in the organizations she founded) to use the A word at every opportunity and in every possible public context.

PUBLICATIONS

The bibliography of this article lists the major printed writings of Madalyn Murray O'Hair, but it is not possible to list even a few of the enormous numbers of audiotapes and videotapes documenting her long career in the commercial broadcast media as well as her efforts to create her own atheist radio and television programs. Several of her books comprise transcripts of her radio programs. Among these are *What on Earth Is an Atheist!* and *An Atheist Speaks*.

Probably her two most important books are *Freedom under Siege*, published in 1974 and *An Atheist Epic*, first published in 1968 and revised in 1989.

Freedom under Siege: The Impact of Organized Religion on Your Liberty and Your Pocketbook details the extent of tax exemptions for church properties and businesses and how they harm the greater society. *An Atheist Epic: The Complete Unexpurgated Story of How Bible and Prayers Were Removed from the Public Schools of the United States*, the 1989 edition of this book, is an autobiographical account of the events leading up to the legal triumph in the U.S. Supreme Court and the aftermath of persecution that forced O'Hair to flee Baltimore for her life.

THE URBAN LEGEND OF FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION FILE RM-2493

More than a decade after the death of Madalyn Murray O'Hair, urban legends continue to circulate concerning her supposed Federal Communications Commission (FCC) petition to ban religious broadcasting in America.

Beginning in March 1975, religious people began writing letters to the FCC begging it not to let "that atheist woman" convince them to ban religious broadcasting from the airwaves. Of course, Madalyn Murray O'Hair had never even asked the FCC to do such a thing, let alone launch a lawsuit to that end. Churches fanned the sparks of this urban legend into an urban epic on the scale of the Great Chicago Fire. Petitions were circulated among the churches and sent to Washington. Letters by the hundreds, then thousands, then millions began to besiege the FCC headquarters in Washington, D.C. More than one evangelist used the fear of the fictive petition as a fund-raising tool of remarkable power.

By the time that O'Hair's son Jon Murray visited the FCC in January 1982, eight persons had been hired just to answer telephone calls about RM 2493—the file number given to someone else's petition, the subject of which had no relationship to O'Hair or to the fictive action being opposed. Five more persons did nothing but open mail about it. Five months later, in May 1982, approximately 13 million letters had been received. The postage alone for those letters would have been more than \$2 million!

O'HAIR'S LEGAL LEGACY

While O'Hair was extremely well read in philosophy and the extant literature on atheism and was more than able to hold her own in debates with religious philosophers and apologists, the formal philosophy of atheism was not the arena in which she sought to stake her claim to fame. Rather, she repeatedly styled herself a fighter for the civil rights of atheists. Consequently, it was in the legal arena that her greatest achievements are to be found.

Although *Murray v. Curlett* of 1963 will probably remain as O'Hair's most enduringly important lawsuit because of its galvanic effect upon religious

pressure groups, causing them to intensify their efforts to “put God back into the classroom,” it was by no means the only important legal struggle in which she engaged. Other important cases of the dozens she brought include the following:

O'Hair v. Pain (1969). After the Christmas Eve flight of astronauts around the moon in 1968, featuring an awe-filled, carefully scripted reading of the first creation myth in the King James Bible, this lawsuit caused the United States government to abandon its plans to continue religious programming in space as a part of the National Aeronautics and Space Agency's moon operations.

O'Hair v. Blumenthal (1977). This case sought to remove the motto “In God We Trust” from U.S. currency and coins. In ruling against the case, U.S. District Court Judge Jack Roberts agreed with a federal appeals court that had said that the use of the motto on coins “has nothing to do with the establishment of religion. Its use is of a patriotic or ceremonial character and bears no true resemblance to a governmental sponsorship of a religious exercise.” The United States Supreme Court refused to review the case on appeal. Attempts to remove religious slogans from money, the national motto, and the pledge of allegiance to the flag continue until now. (All three intrusions of religious language into the secular sphere occurred in the mid-1950s, as the finale of the McCarthy crusade against “Atheist Communism.”)

O'Hair v. Wojtila (1979). This case challenged the right of Pope John Paul II to perform at taxpayers' expense a full Roman Catholic mass on the Washington Mall in the District of Columbia. Other cases attempted to stop the tax exemptions of church businesses and remove a crèche from the rotunda of the Texas capitol building.

In addition, *O'Hair v. Hill* (consented to on July 27, 1984) was an important case that fought the exclusion of atheists from public office mandated by the Texas Constitution (Article I, Section 4): “No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust in this State; nor shall anyone be excluded from holding office on account of his religious sentiments, provided he acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being.”

An “agreed judgment” was secured that read, “The parties hereby agree that the last phrase, ‘. . . provided he acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being,’ is void and of no further effect in that it is in violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.”

When O'Hair began this long-drawn-out lawsuit, seven state constitutions contained civil impediments to atheists. During the adjudication of the Texas case, American Atheists chapter directors in Mississippi, North Carolina, and Tennessee succeeded in voiding the antiatheist language in their states' constitutions. These judgments left only Arkansas and Pennsylvania continuing to discriminate against atheists in their charter documents. Nevertheless, O'Hair often complained that atheists were the only remaining minority against which both government and private citizens could discriminate—not only with impunity but with approbation as well.

The legal impediments to atheists in regard to holding public office are still in effect in a few states. Consider the following passages from state constitutions:

Texas: "Art. I, Sec. 4. No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office, or public trust, in this state; nor shall anyone be excluded from holding office on account of his religious sentiments, provided he acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being." (Found to be void and without force in *O'Hair v. Hill*, 1984.)

Arkansas: "Art. 19, Sec. 1. No person who denies the being of a God shall hold any office in the civil department of this State, nor be competent to testify as a witness in any court." (Still in force in 2008.)

Mississippi: "Art. 14, Sec. 265. No person who denies the existence of a Supreme Being shall hold any office in this state." (Subsequently repealed.)

North Carolina: "Art. VI, Sec. 8. The following persons shall be disqualified for office: First, any person who shall deny the being of Almighty God." (Subsequently repealed.)

Pennsylvania: "Art. I, Sec. 4. No person who acknowledges the being of a God and a future state of rewards and punishments shall, on account of his religious sentiments, be disqualified to hold any office or place of trust or profit under this Commonwealth." (Still in force in 2008.)

South Carolina: "Art. IV, Sec. 2. No person shall be eligible to the office of governor who denies the existence of the Supreme Being (also Lt. Governor)." (Subsequently repealed.)

Tennessee: "Art. IX, Par. 2. No person who denies the being of God, or a future state of rewards and punishments, shall hold any office in the civil department of the State." (Subsequently repealed.)

CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

It may be argued that since 1963 virtually every attack upon Thomas Jefferson's "wall of separation between church and state" has been in retaliation to *Murray v. Curlett*—the case that religious opponents say "kicked God out of the public schools." The steady encroachment of religion upon public affairs—everything from graduation and locker room prayers to the teaching of so-called intelligent design in public schools and the "faith-based initiatives" of President George W. Bush—seems clearly to be a conscious working out of a broadly based plan to recapture the territory gained by Madalyn Murray O'Hair on June 17, 1963.

The capture of the United States judiciary system—including now a majority on the U.S. Supreme Court—by conservative religious factions makes it likely that the equivalent of *Murray v. Curlett* cannot be achieved again for many years. Worse yet, there is serious worry that the present Court may completely undo the achievement of that case.

One area, however, where O'Hair's contemporary relevance may be of surprisingly great significance is a field where an accident made her unable to succeed in her lifetime: New Testament criticism. In 1979 she announced that she was soon to publish a book entitled *Jesus Christ, Super Fraud*, that would demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth never existed—even as a mere human being. Although serious scholarship had bruited about this idea sporadically since the 1790s, no serious scholars had argued the mythical nature of Jesus since the posthumous *The Birth of the Gospel* of William Benjamin Smith in 1957. Almost the entire world of biblical scholars laughed as they awaited O'Hair's book.

Jesus Christ, Super Fraud, however, was never to appear. O'Hair was composing the entire book on an off-brand word processor and was about 80 percent finished with the first draft. Then, a power surge wiped out the circuits in the machine, and all her work was lost. Having to contend with increased harassment by the Internal Revenue Service and even more threatening lawsuits aimed not only at her family and American Atheists, Inc., but also at her precious American Atheist library corporation, O'Hair never got back to reconstructing the book. The notoriety surrounding her claims, however, was to goad widespread further investigations.

The Englishman G. A. Wells had already broached the possibility of Jesus' nonhistoricity in his 1975 work, *Did Jesus Exist?* but he did not have access to the media for his idea in the way that O'Hair did. Although quite properly he is credited with being the first serious scholar of the later twentieth century to advocate the Jesus-as-myth position, quite possibly his 1982 treatise, *The Historical Evidence for Jesus*, would have gone largely unnoticed had not many people picked up his misleadingly titled book (it actually argues *against* Jesus' historicity) expecting a rejoinder to O'Hair's "mad" thesis.

Many scholars, including the present writer, were dismayed by O'Hair's all-too-well-publicized claims and scurried to reexamine the evidence concerning the historicity of Jesus for themselves. Many of us were stunned by what we did *not* find: any credible evidence to prove that Jesus had ever existed. Articles in *American Atheist* throughout the 1980s and 1990s argued in support of the thesis that Jesus and the Twelve Apostles never existed. In 1992, Professor Alvar Ellegård published (in Swedish) his *The Myth of Jesus*, republished in 1999 in English as *Jesus One Hundred Years Before Christ: A Study in Creative Mythology*. The Jesus Seminar scholar Robert M. Price evolved steadily toward the full mythicist position in his *Deconstructing Jesus* (2000), *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man* (2003), and *Jesus Is Dead* (2007). Earl Doherty published *The Jesus Puzzle* in 1999 and *Challenging the*

Verdict: A Cross-Examination of Lee Strobel's "The Case for Christ" in 2001. My own *The Jesus the Jews Never Knew*, which appeared in 2003, attempts to show that the ancient Jews never heard of Jesus of Nazareth—or of Nazareth itself, for that matter. René Salm's *The Myth of Nazareth* (2008) exhaustively reexamines all archaeological evidence from present-day Nazareth and demonstrates that the site was not inhabited at the time Jesus and his family were supposed to be living there.

At the present time at least five younger scholars are working on book-length presentations of the mythicist position, and it seems likely that the next generation of New Testament critics will agree with Madalyn O'Hair that Jesus was not a historical figure.

ULTIMATE RELEVANCE

While the writings of Madalyn Murray O'Hair are still in print and thus are able to influence those who would follow her in the cause of attaining full civil rights for atheists, and while the lawsuits she won and lost have helped determine the conditions of future engagements in the defense of the wall of separation between government and religion, it now seems that she, her son, and her granddaughter are most of all relevant for the dreams they dreamed. Those who would carry on the work of O'Hair and her family should focus more upon her goals than upon her achievements and failures. An editorial by Frank R. Zindler, "In Memoriam," in the Spring 2001 issue of *American Atheist* ended with words that will end this chapter as well:

Greater even than the dream of Martin Luther King were the dreams of the Murray-O'Hairs. Their dreams incorporated all the laudable goals of Dr. King, but amplified and extended them to all of humanity. Beyond that, they had a dream that no individual life should ever again be placed in jeopardy by the reality-testing failure known as religion, nor should the survival of our species be endangered by deluded minds pursuing a cosmic will-o'-the-wisp. No one ever again should be forced to surrender mentally to the slavery of supernaturalism. No one ever again should be forced to pay taxes to support an invisible kingdom known only by the say-so of its ambassadors, the clergy. Never again should the world be thrust into the Dark Ages. Never again should faith vanquish reason.

They dreamed that the divisiveness and hatreds fomented by religions would be overcome by rational minds no longer willing to do evil when given the command "Thus saith the Lord." They dreamed that all of humanity, if they could but shed the darkling lenses and blinders of theology, would see more clearly the path of enlightened self-interest and would realize that peaceful cooperation is more desirable than warfare and strife. They held the hope that humanity would realize before it was too late that they are one with nature, brothers and sisters of the humblest animals, and fellow travelers with them on this spaceship we call Earth.

Such were the dreams of the Murray-O'Hair family, and such are the dreams of those who would honor them by carrying on their work. Madalyn, Jon, and Robin are now immortal—not as liberated souls “that naked on the Air of Heaven ride,” but rather as perishable mortals who, “departing, leave behind us/ Footprints on the sands of time.” Those who would honor their memory must resolve that the death of their bodies must not mark the death of their dreams. Those who carry on must dream the dreams they can no longer dream.

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Much information about Madalyn Murray O'Hair may be found on the Internet Web site of American Atheists, Inc., at www.atheists.org.

The *Philosophes*

Wilda Anderson

INTRODUCTION

Who were the *philosophes*? This term loosely refers to a group of eighteenth-century French thinkers whose various works formed the heart of the French Enlightenment. Their works do not share a single agenda, but they overlap in many ways, primary issues being a challenge to the French monarchy warranted and politically supported by the institution of the Catholic Church and a determination to explore the world by using the new modes of analysis, observation, and critical thought derived from the scientific revolution. There were many precursors, but most notable for the materialists of the French Enlightenment were the methodical analyses of René Descartes (*Discourse on Method* [1637]), the often-neglected discovery of the circulation of the blood by William Harvey (*Anatomical Exercise on the Movement of the Heart and the Circulation of the Blood in Animals* [1628]), and the program of empirical observation and mathematical description of nature established by Sir Isaac Newton. It has often been argued that the French Enlightenment was the inevitable working out of the mechanist consequences of these revolutionary scientific thinkers' discoveries. These three figures embodied three different modes of empiricism, all of which were needed to structure the unbelief of the French *philosophes*.

We must not forget that although these thinkers were all accused by the late seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century European establishment, both political and intellectual, of having imposed an atheistic image of a clockwork universe not needing a providential function either to come into existence or to continue to operate, this is a misreading of their positions. Descartes's work was recast by Malebranche [1638–1715] to argue that the clockwork image of the mechanistic universe is an illusion produced by our limited human perspective. What we see as enduring natural law is in truth God's re-creation of the universe and the reinstitutionalization of its ordering principles at every

moment. Newton, especially, whose work produced the multifaceted community of Newtonians who so typified the wider European Enlightenment, was a firm, not to say fanatical, believer in the Christian God. Indeed, for him the laws of celestial mechanics as he laid them out in the *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy [1687]) were a demonstration of the manifestation of the power and of the very nature of God as God. When criticized as a promoter of unbelief, he answered consistently (for example, in the four letters to Richard Bentley) that the laws of celestial motion were not enough in themselves to cause the solar system to form and to move in the way that it does. He finally went further in the famous General Scholium (appended to the second edition of the *Principia*) to attack head-on the definition of natural law. In this text, so typical of its time in so many ways, and so reminiscent of modern arguments for intelligent design, Newton defined God not merely as the Creator, but essentially, and fundamentally, as the *Lawgiver*.

Now, many of the French Enlightenment Newtonians, and several of the *philosophes*, were therefore perfectly comfortable maintaining deist positions (i.e., they believed in a divine supreme being of some sort, author of the intelligent design of the universe, even if they didn't necessarily follow the dogma of a particular church). Voltaire is probably the best known of these thinkers. Following in the tradition of Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Historical and Critical Dictionary) [1697], which was intended to establish a practice of evaluating the institutional church's past and debunking its dogma through a history of its errors, Voltaire's program of religious and political tolerance disbelieved the church without disbelieving the deity.

But just as certainly there was a tradition of thinkers who wished to push the implications of the methods used by the great scientific revolutionaries to escape the domination of a theocratic view of the world. In effect, for the French Enlightenment, the problem became not "Do you believe in the Holy Roman Catholic Church and the Christian God or not?" but "What do you believe in and what don't you believe in, and how do you define and justify belief?" We could even say that the issue at the heart of the French Enlightenment was to define belief and its relationship to knowing, a tension embodied notably in Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert's great *Encyclopédie* in the opposition between the articles "Certitude" and "Truth." For them, it was not merely religious belief that was at stake. Religious belief was a small subset of the larger body of all forms of knowledge. A whole spectrum of different modes of unbelief therefore became possible and efficacious.

EMPIRICISM

One place to start is to define what the French Enlightenment in particular understood by that much used and much abused term *empiricism*. To do this, we will have to return quickly to the English sources.

First, let it be noted that there is a slight problem when talking about the empirical with respect to eighteenth-century French practitioners, as what the British meant by the word was wider and explicitly theorized and served as the foundation of a full-fledged philosophical program, whereas the French continued to use as well the restricted older conventional definition; see the *Encyclopédie*'s definition in the article "Empirisme," for example, or the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "2. An untrained practitioner in physic or surgery; a quack. b. *transf.* A pretender, impostor, charlatan." From the *OED*, again: "Empiricism" is "The method or practice of an empiric." An "empiric" is "1. A member of the sect among ancient physicians called *Empirici* who (in opposition to the *Dogmatici* and *Methodici*) drew their rules of practice entirely from experience, to the exclusion of philosophical theory." Empiricism was then originally a medical practice that had to do with the observation of the suffering body, which led to effective intervention. It was an antitheoretical *practice*, not a rational *theory*. Observation was opposed to theory, not the enabling condition of theory.

Now, this is not what we mean by *empiricism*; we mean, rather, the later post-scientific-revolution definition found in, for example, the *American Heritage Dictionary*: "noun, philo: the theory that all knowledge is derived from sense experience. *Stimulated by the rise of experimental science*, it developed in the 17th and 18th centuries, expounded in particular by John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume" (*italics added*). For us, an "empiric" is "b. One who, either in medicine or in other branches of science, relies solely upon observation and experiment," but the difference lies in our definition of *experimental*. So let us move quickly to that term. For the Enlightenment, an "experiment" was no longer "b. An expedient or remedy to be tried. *Obs.*," but "3. An action or operation undertaken in order to discover something unknown, to test a hypothesis, or establish or illustrate some known truth." For us, an experiment is part of a systematic process of observation constrained by theory, not an observation divorced from theory. As the nineteenth century would conventionally think, "a. Experiment . . . is merely experience artificially modified"—modified by a method based on our understanding of how knowing is structured. We may worry about getting the experimental "statement" clear with respect to the theory we are trying to test, but we don't regard sense perceptions, necessary for observation, as themselves hopelessly untrustworthy. However, this was the British skeptics' main worry.

John Locke himself said in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*,

I deny not but a man, accustomed to rational and regular experiments, shall be able to see further into the nature of bodies and guess righter at their yet unknown properties than one that is a stranger to them: but yet, as I have said, this is but judgment and opinion, not knowledge and certainty. This way of getting and improving our knowledge in substances only by experience and history, which is all that the weakness of our faculties in this state of mediocrity which we are in in this world can attain to, makes me suspect that natural philosophy is not capable of being made a science. (IV. xii. §10)

In this, Locke sounds as though he agrees with the traditional definition of empiricism and the skeptics. Yet Newton went where Locke feared to tread, and modern empiricisms were the result.

So let us return finally to Newton. We think of him as one of the greatest of the founders of modern scientific practice, especially experimental method. Here is one of his definitions of experimentation, from the famous letter to Henry Oldenberg of June 10, 1672: “For the best and safest method of philosophizing seems to be, first, to inquire diligently into the properties of things and to establish those properties by experiments, and to proceed [only] later to hypotheses for the explanation of the things themselves” (*Correspondence*, 1.164).

We usually assume from texts like these that Newton was an empiricist; that is, he used his senses first to produce observations (the perception of the phenomena), and theorized (inductively) after. While this is true, it is an insufficient construal. I would argue that he practiced four distinct forms of empirical analysis: one that produced the celestial mechanics, one that produced the theory of light and colors, his alchemical practice, and one that produced his deciphering of biblical prophecy. For our purposes we need to characterize only the relationship of the first to the second, as this is what was relevant to our French *philosophes*.

The physics is the Newton we all are most familiar with. He and his contemporaries measured the motions of the heavenly bodies, including comets, and from these measurements derived the periodicity of their elliptical orbits, from which Newton deduced the three laws of motion and the mathematical supposition of gravity. Please note: From *visual observation* comes measurement; from measurement, natural law. If visual observation is suspect, so is the whole celestial mechanics.

The *Opticks* is the work in which Newton elaborated the consequences of his celebrated *experimentum crucis*, or crucial experiment, of 1672, in which he split white light into the rainbow spectrum by passing it through a prism and then recombined the rainbow into white light by passing the light back through a prism to show that color is a property of light, not as had always been assumed, a function of the emotional state of the perceiver. The point here is that Newton used the theory of color in light to justify the use of a particular sense—vision—as being not inherently subject to error. Error comes from how well the eyeball works, and it is an issue of physics, pure and simple: “When a man views any object . . . the light which comes from the several points of the object is refracted by the transparent skins and humors of the eye . . . so as to converge and meet again in so many points in the bottom of the eye, and there to paint the picture of the object upon the skin . . . with which the bottom of the eye is covered, and these pictures, propagated by motion along the fibers of the optic nerves in the brain, are the cause of vision” (3rd ed., 12). It is therefore possible to argue that by giving a physical explanation of vision, Newton authorized vision as a reliable, because an understandable

and thus controllable, source of sense data. In this fashion, he also departed from the conventional dismissal of vision as the primary agency of error. In other words, not just *any* suspect sense, but *the* suspect sense, had been rehabilitated. The subject matter of the medical empiric had been incorporated into the field of the natural philosopher.

Newton's definition of the experimental, because it uses sense-based observations as the ground for subsequent inductions and deductions, is opposed to the idealist rationalizing of the Cartesians, who divorced logic from suspect sense-based data (as Descartes first theorized in the *Discourse on Method*). I have argued that Newton's distinction of the experimental from the "merely" empirical was justified by his systematizing of the causes of sense data through an extension of physical analysis to the domain of color theory and through color theory to sight and thence, in several other texts, by extension to the other senses. If this analysis is done correctly, then the suspect nature of sense data is eliminated. The mathematization of the analysis through the *Opticks* allows it to be used to justify, indeed impose, reasoning from sensation and thus justifies the observations underlying the celestial mechanics. In this way, then, Newton was also setting the conditions that allowed the philosophizing of the empiricists' *experience* into *experiment*, and thus the modification of the empirical into something more like our modern notion.

The distinction between *experience* and *experiment* is important in English, but the same word is used in French for both (*expérience*), and I think that this is not a trivial difference between the two languages. If for the English the danger was the suspect data that come from the senses, for the Enlightenment French authors, the danger was rather the Cartesian tradition because Cartesian philosophy, so well structured conceptually, was not grounded in experiential data. The French certainly wished to avoid the dangers of the empiric's quackery, a function of his refusal of all system or philosophy. However, already good systematists, they also wished to avoid the dangers of the cartesian "romance," as Roger Cotes called Descartes's *Monde* (The World) in his preface to the second edition of Newton's *Principia Mathematica*. Their attitude was derived from a good understanding of what Newton meant by *experimental*, intertwined with their earlier medical notion of the empirical. Indeed, as we shall see, one of the most important contributions of the *philosophes* was to import medical thinking into the experimental paradigm of physics.

THE EARLY PHILOSOPHES

The *philosophes* can be divided into three generations. We will be speaking of members of the first two generations, as these were the *philosophes* who explicitly addressed the issues of materialism. The first generation was best typified by the deist Voltaire (1694–1778) on one side, so well known for the

vulgarization of Newton's *Principia* that he and Mme. du Châtelet produced, which introduced Newton to the larger French intellectual community. The opposite pole was certainly Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689–1755), author of the *Spirit of the Laws* and especially, for our purposes, celebrated for his work investigating the functioning of the glandular system of the human body, for which he was inducted into the Academy of Sciences of the city of Bordeaux in 1716. Montesquieu seems to have been a tepid Christian, close to a deist, most if not all of his life, but his works, in their combination of a medical empiricism with a Newtonian experimental methodology, present a set of concepts that effectively make him the father of a materialist tradition increasingly peopled by unbelievers of one sort or another.

The “Essai sur les causes qui peuvent affecter les esprits et les caractères” (“Essay on the Causes That Can Affect the Mind and the Character”) follows up on the principles Montesquieu set forth in his inaugural discourse of 1716, to propose, in effect, a new science of human behavior. It was to be based on an extension of Harvey's work on the circulation of the blood into a study of the circulation of the glandular secretions of the human body. Montesquieu believed that the humors of the old Galenic medieval medical theories were actually the very real secretions of the glandular network, produced in the reaction of the human body to its emotional environment. The secretions themselves could, in turn, provoke emotional states by establishing within the body a sort of chemical hydraulics in which the chemical interactions of the fluids and the different pressures built up by their interactions and circulations determined the dominant secretion. So if one could control how the body produced the secretions or modify their circulation, one would be able to modify the emotional state of the human mind.

Montesquieu's proposal has five tenets: First, the empirical study of the body made possible by Harvey's dissections of animals showed the body to be the semiclosed dynamic system of the circulation of these glandular secretions, in which their hydraulic and chemical interactions form a structurally imposed feedback mechanism; in other words, the human body has an *economy* in the technical sense of the term. Second, this bodily economy manifests the emotional state of the person and determines how people interact. Third, it is by this interaction, effectively, that social behavior and therefore political behavior are conditioned by the physiological states of the individual bodies. Fourth, this mass of individual human bodies forms, to all intents and purposes, a social body that itself is, in effect, a real body: The *body of the state* is a body like the singular human body in that it has its own economy, with the circulation of commercial, military, and political forces to keep it functioning. This political body is, like the human body, both the product of and subject to the conditions of the geographical and climatic environment in which it finds itself. Fifth, what one eats, the temperature of one's environment, how hard one has to struggle with one's muscles for the body to operate

in that environment—all these conditions influence the content and circulation of the glandular secretions within one's body. So the location of a nation determines its inhabitants' physiological states, their resulting behavior, and, as a consequence, what kind of government can best be suited to that behavior. Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (Persian Letters) and his *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur et la décadence des Romains* (Considerations on the Causes of the Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans) were his "case studies" preceding the generalized theory made available in the *Spirit of the Laws*. The effect of this theory was to naturalize history: Political action now was seen to result from physiological natural law, just as the bodies in their celestial orbits followed the laws of physics. Montesquieu had done for political "motion" what the *Opticks* and the *Principia* had done for physics. Montesquieu was the Newton of history.

So who cared? The second generation of the *philosophes* did. And so did the Catholic Church, which placed *The Spirit of the Laws* on the Index of banned books in 1751. If history could be naturalized, then not only inanimate things but also human beings were determined not by their own free will nor by the action of divine will, but by the working out of the consequences of a system of natural laws built into their material, physiological world. It may not have been Montesquieu's intention or belief, but the *philosophes* of the generation following him used his work and Newton's physics to justify a wholesale shift to a materialist picture of the world incorporating both the world and man, one in which the focus moved from the soul to the body, a mechanistic world in which a divine Providence would no longer be needed to maintain the functioning of either nature or culture. As Pierre-Simon de Laplace, the mathematician (and he was one of the most committed of the absolute mechanical materialists), would say at the end of the century, God was no longer a hypothesis that he needed to make sense of the material world. Or as Julien Offray de La Mettrie would soon write in *L'Homme machine*, man is a machine.

The irony, then, is that the empiricists whose work was intended to produce a vision of the world as the result of intelligent design were directly responsible for the competing worldview, in which the order in the world was the result of the operation of mechanistic forces on material substance. The primary thinkers among the *philosophes* who adopted this position were the second-generation *philosophes* La Mettrie, Claude Adrien Helvétius, Paul Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, the logician Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, and especially Denis Diderot.

The second-generation *philosophes'* work is the highpoint of the Enlightenment unbelievers. Their most influential period spans roughly 1745 to the late 1770s. They were a highly visible and controversial group, giving rise even to conspiracy theories among their adversaries. In 1759, Joly de Fleury, in the indictment report that, as the prosecutor responsible to the Assembly of the Clergy of France, he presented on Helvétius's *De l'esprit* (*Concerning the Mind*)

and on the “Helvétius affair” (the public controversy leading to the banning of the book by the church and the royal censors) that resulted from it, fumed, “Can it be dissimulated that a project has been conceived, a Society formed, to sustain materialism, to inspire the independence and corruption of ethical mores?” (Bourdin, 12). We can easily understand that such a point of view would have been common by the end of the 1750s and might have seemed perfectly well grounded. After all, in the Preliminary Discourse to his *System of the World*, La Mettrie in 1750 had grandly proclaimed, “To write as a philosopher is to teach materialism! So what? What harm is there, if this materialism is well founded, if it is the evident result of all of the observations and experiments of the greatest of the philosophers and doctors?” (quoted in Bourdin, 73–74). The authority of a Newton or Montesquieu linked to the *philosophes*’ programs allowed the materialists to begin to emerge from the obscurity in which the freethinkers had managed to survive for over a century. For although there had been materialist atheist thinkers of some weight before the second generation of the *philosophes*, it was not really until this time period that they became a public phenomenon. The famous *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres* (The Encyclopedia, or Logically Ordered and Complete dictionary of the Sciences, Arts and Skilled Professions, by a Society of Men of Letters) of Diderot and d’Alembert, an enormous collective work produced by dozens of *philosophes*, of heterogeneous points of view, was seen and condemned as the bastion of materialist atheism. Just one example: One of the most infamous articles was Abbé Claude Yvon’s “Âme des bêtes” (“Animal Souls”). A follow-up to his magisterial and extremely controversial “Âme” (“Soul”) article, which provides a dense overview of the ancients’ and the moderns’ theories of the soul, focusing particularly on a critique of Benedict de Spinoza, “Animal Souls” addresses the consequence of understanding animals as Cartesian automata that, although they behave as humans do, are really only machines because they have no soul and no consciousness. The extension of this article into a corresponding critique of the article “Soul” was easy to make and was the source of much outrage on the part of the church. Consistently asserting the distinction between the animal body and the body-and-soul human, the article is nonetheless a paean to the almost magical beauty of the functioning animal body. Typical of the rhetorical strategies of the *Encyclopedia*, which say without saying and leave much to the discernment of the reader, this less-than-subtle article clears the belief that man is a machine, and that God would not have made something as beautiful as a responsive animal to be a lie: It must think and feel just as a man does, so that if man has a soul, there is no reason to suppose that animals don’t, too. The article, all the while proclaiming its religious devotion, nonetheless states that for animals, just as for men, “everything links up and is mutually supporting: the soul, as the principle of sensitivity, is subject to a mechanism that in some way transmits to it the impression of exterior objects; as active principle it

itself presides over another subordinate mechanism which being for it nothing other than its instrument, gives its resulting action all of the necessary regularity” (*Encyclopédie*, 1.349). Abbé Yvon went on to say that God had *revealed* that man’s soul is immortal and concluded that even if animals have souls, their soul, as the principle for acting on sensation, dies with their bodies. The conclusion, not stated explicitly in this article, was nonetheless impossible not to draw: Do we really need the hypothesis of the soul and thus of the God that created it and gave it meaning?

The *Encyclopédie* article “L’Âme des bêtes,” with its discussion of the automaton and its relations to the body and the problem of consciousness, is a forerunner of the work of modern cognitivists. For an illustration of debates about artificial intelligence (the possibility of a machine’s gaining consciousness), see the modern mathematician Kurt Gödel’s critique of the concept of the Turing machine proposed by Alan Turing in the 1930s. A Turing machine is a machine like a computer in whose setup a discrete set of functions and instructions can reproduce the activity of the human mind. Any operation that the mind can achieve through a recognizable and definable set of rules should occur in a Turing machine. The question remains whether such a machine can gain what we normally refer to as consciousness. In other words, Gödel asked, can a Turing machine be self-reflexive? Does it have the ability not just to appear to have a human soul, but to actually have one? The question is, then, what is intelligence? Is it simply context-bound, produced by environment and a specific ecosystem, or does it lend itself to mathematical abstractions and their realization within automated systems? Gödel said the machine cannot attain awareness because it cannot ever be self-reflexive. Only the human mind can achieve self-reflexivity because, unlike a machine whose structure is predetermined, its internal structure is dynamic and can change as a result of its operation.

Baron d’Holbach, a wealthy aristocrat who used his position and holdings to provide a site for the discussions of the *philosophes* and who was himself one of the most articulate and outspoken of the atheist materialists, was one of the early and most vocal advocates of these positions in his extension of these principles to their social consequences, systematized at last in his *Système social*.

However, one problem with d’Holbach’s system was that it could not explain how, if the world were so obviously mechanically structured, the various forms of religion had always managed to develop and maintain unquestioned power over people’s minds and hearts. In essence this problem became, for the materialists of the 1750s, a crucial question to answer before going on

to further elaborate their social programs. A first response came from a key member of the second-generation *philosophes* in 1754.

Essentially, this response involved presenting language as one component in a triadic interactive system: The structure of the world, mirrored in the structure of thought, is expressed in the structure of language. A language perfectly adequate to the world should therefore result in statements whose truth value is self-evident and should automatically eliminate issues of competing opinion, for who can argue with nature? The grounding for this solution began with an essential work written by Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714–1780), one of the most radical followers of empirical sensationism and, although an ordained member of the clergy, an essential member of the second generation of materialist *philosophes*. (It is worth noting that his response would lead to Antoine Laurent Lavoisier's chemical nomenclature, to Pierre-Simon de Laplace, and to the positivist natural sciences of the nineteenth century, including the "religion" of positivism invented by Auguste Comte.)

CONDILLAC ON SENSATIONS

In 1754 Condillac published the *Traité des sensations* (Treatise on Sensations)—the centerpiece of a group of works that included the *Traité des systèmes* (Treatise on Systems) in 1749 and culminated in 1778 with the *Logique* (Logic), his most renowned work because it synthesized all his earlier theories. Whereas the *Treatise on Systems* was intended to give a basis to scientific work by providing a detailed description of how the body's senses interact with the material world to produce knowledge, the *Logic* describes the structure of thought processes and thus of arguments predetermined by such a body. The intersection of these two works shows how Condillac hoped to derive an unshakable authority for all reasoned argument, based on the laws of the natural world, both physical and physiological. Moreover, Abbé Yvon had in "Animal Souls" argued that even animals, especially animals living in communities, must have some form of language, for language is a naturally resulting phenomenon when bodies sense the world around them.

Condillac's *Logic* is an example of how the Enlightenment promoted vision into the paradigmatic position for explaining both the order inherent in the material world and the natural, logical procedures for observing it:

Now what is this order? . . . It is the order in which nature presents the objects to us. There are some objects which attract our gaze more particularly . . . and all the other objects seem to be arranged around them and for the sake of them. . . . Thus we begin with the principal objects: we observe them successively and compare them in order to judge the relations in which they stand. When, by this means, we have grasped their respective locations, we successively observe all those objects which fill the intervals, comparing each one with the nearest principal object and determining its position. At this point we

distinguish all the objects whose form and location we have grasped, and we encompass them all in a single gaze. The order which exists among them in our mind is thus no longer successive; it is simultaneous. It is the same as the order in which the objects exist. (Book 1, chap. 2, 67–69)

The observer then tags each object with a word, and the resulting nomenclature is a perfect (because true) language whose structures mimic the relations existing between the objects in the material and mental worlds (whence the importance eventually given to tabular scientific nomenclatures by scientists like Lavoisier, the inventor of modern chemistry).

Condillac's *Treatise on Sensations* provided the origin of this sensory construal of observation, knowledge, and language. Rather than showing how we can understand our methods of observation as they already exist, Condillac tried to show how they might have come about in a newly created human mind. He introduced his famous conceit of the living statue—really a body without a past—that acquires one sense at a time and whose consequent reactions to the material world Condillac analyzed to prove that no knowledge need be innate. (Innateness of knowledge would imply an ordering Providence, which was precisely what had to be negated.) The *Treatise* differed from the later *Logic*, and, indeed, from many other *philosophes'* work, in that its most basic notions, such as identity and difference, past and present, inside and outside, are explained by examples taken not from the sense of vision, but from touch. Condillac held that vision becomes in the end the most powerful tool and the sense through which the others are understood, but only after touch has turned *seeing* into *observing*.

For every sense except touch, sensations are perceived by the statue as being only modifications of itself. But all these perceptions are passive: The statue has as yet no understanding of the notion of self. It perceives itself as the perfume of the rose it smells or the color of the tree it sees. The one sense that works differently from the others is touch, for it is the only one that can produce a doubled sensation: the sensation felt by the statue's touching hand as it moves along its thigh is mirrored by its body's corresponding sensation of being touched until, in its motion across surfaces, the hand passes to a foreign object. At that point the statue realizes that it is no longer feeling itself, and for the first time it conceptualizes "otherness" and "boundary" and, by opposition, "self." Once it can conceive of otherness, the involuntary movements provoked by pleasure and pain are perceived as motion toward or away from external sources of sensation. The statue thus learns that it does move and can then will itself consciously to move and consequently to explore its own motions. Only touch, therefore, can go from passive perception to willed action.

Motion, then, is always required for discrimination, that is, for perceiving something as an object distinct from its surroundings. The statue conceives of the space around it, then of a succession of objects, and finally of the abstract notion of succession itself (Book 2, chap. 3, 8). When it understands succession,

it not only can will but can also compare and judge: "It thus analyzes naturally, and this confirms what I have demonstrated in my logic, that nature of itself teaches us to analyze" (Book 2, chap. 8, 12, 14). Once the statue can judge through touch, its passive perception (seeing) is changed into active vision (observing), because it now observes that color, which it had before taken to be only a quality of the surface of its eyes, is the indication of either a boundary or a volume that it has already felt. Thus vision becomes an extension of touch. Touch has been generalized to become a method, the analytic method of continual, willed comparison and differentiation. Memory, ordered by the notion of succession, allows the statue to synthesize, and the eyes take over. But the eyes are so powerful that once touch has trained them, they induce weakness in the other senses. The statue forgets that touch was the mother of and remains the pattern for observation; it thinks from then on through the paradigm of analytic vision presented in the *Logic*. And we are back to the visual observations of Newton, now justified not by the physics of light, but by the natural history of the sensing brain.

The argument followed by Condillac in the *Treatise on Sensations* has the same structure as the analytic procedure followed by the senses themselves. One tiny step at a time, like the statue, we follow his chain of linked observations derived from the relentless operation of Condillac's reflections on sensations. We the readers move from a state of conceptual insensibility to the synthesized picture of the statue, who has become a thinking, judging person furnished with moral principles. The style is dry but rhetorically effective. This was not merely an astute stylistic choice. Condillac argued that it was the only style that maintained natural authority.

Why? The structure of Condillac's analysis requires that the language be in its essence denotative. In other words, each sensation must reduce to a single idea, which is represented by one word. A language operating in accordance with this constraint always correctly portrays the world. But conversely, if a word must always denote one and only one observed thing, it follows that no metaphors or other forms of analogy can be used, for they all rely on at least a comparison between two ideas, and on the suggestion that those two ideas are in some way the sign of the same object. In other words, it becomes possible for one word to mean two things or two words to mean one thing. Because poetic or literary uses of language depend on just this kind of connotative suggestion and the figurative multiplications of meaning, Condillac felt that literary language could lead only into a primordial confusion for his statue, who would lose its clear analytic grasp of the network of cause-and-effect relationships structuring its world and its language. And at this point, we finally understand why Condillac felt the *Treatise on Sensations* had solved the problem raised by d'Holbach, for such metaphorical thinking was, for Condillac, at the origin of superstition and thus of religion:

The statue feels at every moment its dependence on its environment. . . .
Convinced that it does nothing unintentionally, it seems to see design in all the

actions it discerns. It only judges them by what it notices in itself. . . . It thinks, then, that what pleases it has the intention of pleasing it, and . . . it now wishes the objects to have the intention of loading it with benefits and of warding off evil. It wishes in fact everything to be propitious, and its wish is a sort of prayer. . . . In a word it will worship all things upon which it depends. (Book 4, chap. 4, 1–2)

The statue's analogical attributing of its own experience of having intention, of willing, to the foreign sources of its pain and pleasure is an important mistake in analytic thinking. Desire or emotion (here the desire to obtain pleasure) provokes analogies, which produce figurative, poetic thinking. For Condillac the true Fall, then, was not from faith into pride born of reason, as the church would have it, but from reason into religion born by metaphor out of desire. But once the objects of its religious faith—the gods as causal agents—could be demonstrated to be illusions derived from errors in the statue's own logical analysis, they could hardly be held up as the creators of natural law. By showing how such error occurred and could have been avoided, the analytic method—both for observation and for telling the results of that observation to someone else—was thought to have achieved definitive authority over its major opponent, religion.

Condillac's reformulation of the materialist program as a history of human thinking, then, attempted to solve the historical problem of the success of religious belief by denouncing it as an erroneous mode of logic based on emotion—understandable, but once the error is cleared up, no longer acceptable as authority. This construal already had a solid life of its own, for example, in the reworking of the Tree of Knowledge, derived from Sir Francis Bacon, that graced the final pages of the "Preliminary Discourse" to Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopedie* (xxxv): There, the editors had divided knowledge according to the three faculties of the human mind, and religion was relegated to a tiny little subtwig next to superstition.

Nonetheless, Condillac's own program depended on a parallel between the structure of the world and the inevitable structure of thought that itself could be explained only as the result of a Providence that "built us that way" to ensure that we would perceive the world in the way that would guarantee our survival. So by solving one problem, Condillac really only created another. What was needed was a more radical restating of the problem, and we find this restatement in the works of the most extreme of the *philosophes*, Denis Diderot (1713–1784), son of a knife maker from Langres, soul of the giant multiauthored work that embodied the French Enlightenment, the *Encyclopédie*.

DIDEROT AND MATERIALISM

The *Rêve de d'Alembert* (D'Alembert's Dream), which was written and circulated clandestinely in 1769, is often said to be Diderot's most coherent statement of

his materialist philosophy. He wrote several more classically philosophical accounts, like *De l'Interprétation de la nature* (On the Interpretation of Nature), the *Eléments de physiologie* (Elements of Physiology, a notebook written to himself over the period 1774–1784), and the *Principes philosophiques de la matière et du mouvement* (Philosophical Principles Concerning Matter and Movement), but in *D'Alembert's Dream* all the pieces are available together.

In *On the Interpretation of Nature*, the first text in which his materialism became a fully coherent theory, Diderot had warned his reader that anyone who read his book “Spinozistically” was misreading him. (And it would indeed be easy to confuse his view of the functioning of the material world with Spinoza’s.) His warning could just as well have preceded *D'Alembert's Dream*: “P.S. One more word, and I leave you. Always keep in mind that *nature* is not *God*, that a *man* is not a *machine*, that a *hypothesis* is not a *fact*; and be assured that you will not have understood me at all wherever you think you see something contrary to these principles” (26). Beyond that, he did not emphasize the profound atheism his materialism was to make possible.

But in *D'Alembert's Dream* he did not hide away the issue of his atheism in an ambiguous postscript; rather, he addressed the issue directly. The question of the nonnecessity of a divine being had to be resolved before any materialism would be able to hold its own logically.

Diderot’s use of the term *god* contains two notions, sometimes alternately, sometimes simultaneously. The first is that of a god as the principle of activity. The second is the network of related images of a god as all-powerful. The two notions are not of equal importance, as a god might just possibly be the principle of the dynamic without being all-powerful. Let us begin with the notion of the dynamic.

As was discussed earlier, for both Descartes and Newton the material world consisted of passive substance without inherent dynamism. God added dynamism from without to provoke movement as reaction. God served as the agent; the world only reacted according to the laws that God built into it. From this position comes the deterministic view of the world.

If there is no god to create man’s free soul, if the world is merely matter following these rules, then determinism opposes the idea of free will. The mind-body problem could be restated as follows: It is unacceptable for humans not to be the responsible source of—in other words, to will—their own actions. If their willing an action is merely a reaction to something they are unaware of, then their will is not free even though they move to initiate action. For will to be really free, a mind-body distinction must exist to ensure that the mind is not merely reacting to its environment. Even then, however, freedom relating to mental phenomena is merely displaced. The first problem posed is the theological one: Assuming a god exists, does that god determine a person’s choice, or is that person not only responsible for but also the sufficient cause of his own decisions? If God-the-lawgiver is also God-the-creator, why would

he create a world in which his creatures could choose to do wrong? The logical incoherence can be eliminated by elimination of a god from the picture—the explicit or implicit positions of Helvétius or Pierre-Louis de Maupertuis, for example. A second problem then arises. Casting the world as total materialism in the reactive form that Helvétius and Maupertuis chose effectively maintains the mind-body distinction, with the mind side of the world—along with all of its attributes, like decision and creation—merely eliminated. The passivity of the mechanistic construal of materialism is not a necessary logical consequence of having chosen a materialist viewpoint, however. So although determinism is typically assumed to be the inevitable consequence of adopting an uncompromising materialism, it depends instead on an unperceived conceptual incompleteness in the *reactive* form of materialism: A mind-body distinction is first established, and then mind is discarded. The opposition of action to reaction is a logical consequence only of the separation of mind and body, not of the choice of the materialist viewpoint. Because he wished to push the implications of the mechanistic views of the universe to their logical limits and to solve the problems he saw in his contemporaries' materialist accounts, Diderot eliminated not mind, but god from his vision of the world so as to be able to construct a picture of a material world sufficient unto itself. He chose to give matter the capacity not only to react but to act on its own, and to do so, he had to introduce an inherent principle of dynamism.

The critical distinction between passive matter and active matter hinges on positing a passage from inert matter to feeling and thinking matter; in this way, Diderot recast the mind-body opposition. If his materialism was to be rigorously atheist, it had then to be able to account for mental behavior and the phenomenon of consciousness.

The very first lines of *D'Alembert's Dream* begin by confronting the issue head-on: In this book, Diderot opposed the idea of a god to the concept of *sensibility*, that is, the capacity of matter to sense or to feel. In an ironic allusion to Condillac's statue in the *Treatise on Sensations*, Diderot then explained in his own way how matter can move from inert to active sensibility using a statue understood as a man-shaped stone. In the stone, sensibility is inert. Grind the stone up, ferment it into humus, grow a plant in it, feed the plant to a human being, and the material of the stone that has passed into the body of the human does indeed feel, even think. The sensibility that was only latent in the statue-stone has been forced into a structure in which it becomes active. This is how you bring the statue "to life."

But the mind-body proponents behind intelligent design might still pose a critical question: Aren't these mechanisms always the same, so that some god somewhere may be conceived of as having created them? For Newton, the notions of law and lawgiver implied each other and were corollaries to the idea of a world of static matter set into motion by an exterior dynamic source. But for Diderot, the structure of the mechanism of change was, rather than a universal and ahistorical law, itself a historically contingent event. Natural law

and the resulting practice of thinking deterministically were only local eddies in the coordination of the material world, not reliable for predicting the behavior of the world across long periods of time. We are not told the reason until much later: “In this immense ocean of matter, there is not one molecule that resembles another molecule, not one molecule that resembles itself for an instant: *a new order of things is born*—such is its eternal inscription” (128–129). How can we understand such a world of constant change? This historicization of the material world undermined the notion of absolute or ahistorical natural law and, in so doing, eliminated natural law as the guarantee of the “readability” of the causal relationships between the events in the world’s past or in its future—in other words, of determinism. The universal and enduring stability produced by natural law has been replaced by another type of continuity, this one having a historical nature with its origin firmly planted within the world of matter, though Diderot first presented it, provocatively, in mental terms:

DIDEROT: Can you tell me what the existence of a sentient body consists of, with respect to itself?

D’ALEMBERT: It’s the consciousness of having been itself, from the first instant of its reflection until the present moment.

DIDEROT: And on what is this consciousness based?

D’ALEMBERT: On the memory of its actions.

DIDEROT: And without this memory?

D’ALEMBERT: Without this memory it would have no self, since, sensing its existence only at that moment, it would have no history of its life. Its life would be a disjunctive series of sensations that nothing linked.

DIDEROT: Very good. And what is memory? What does it come from?

D’ALEMBERT: From a particular organization that grows, weakens, and sometimes disappears altogether.

DIDEROT: If, then, a sentient being having this organization particular to memory links the impressions that it receives, forms through this linking a history of its life, and acquires consciousness of itself, it denies, it affirms, it concludes, it thinks. (99–100)

This spatial and dynamic organization existing within matter must have a substrate to exist in, and that substrate has a particular structure as well. The fibers that make up the organs of a living body resonate, like the struck strings of a clavichord, to all analogues of touch recognized by the senses, whether the origin of the sensation is outside or inside the body. A touch causes a fiber, like a string in the clavichord, to resonate, to produce the mental equivalent of a sound understood as vibration. If sensations are vibrations occurring within the network of fibers, then the motion of a sensation occurring in one

fiber can, as does sound in a well-tuned clavichord or in a tuning fork, cause sympathetic vibration in a neighboring fiber.

This model had two advantages for Diderot. The first was that it allowed him to get around the problem of the time linearity of sensation and thus of thought, a problem that had posed logical difficulties for his nonmaterialist predecessors as well as for himself in attempting to generate an explanation of the structure of consciousness. Diderot modeled thought as material events occurring in a spatial network, thus permitting the coexistence of two sensations. This coexistence allowed the phenomenon of a sensation-of-sensing to occur at the same time that the immediate sensation took place, and even to be explained as an event materially provoked by the occurrence of the immediate sensation. Consciousness of the sensation added to the sensation itself yielded the complex event-object named *idea*. But not only could two thoughts occur at the same time; a single thought could be seen to provoke the simultaneous occurrence of a multiplicity of mental events.

This theory depends on Diderot's definition of sensibility. Sensibility operates both mentally and materially; it is a form of sensitivity to anything that touches the individual, whether that be a hand, an idea, or a tender scene. It is a state, a manifestation of the organization of matter, that can be transmitted by contact and whose defining characteristic is that it propagates as resonance. This resonance, in turn, acts on surrounding objects and can cause their patterning to respond. The fiber network is "tuned," or modified into a pattern, by its experiences, so that a touch from without or within may reprove the same "sound" that caused the initial patterning. This tuning voluntarily or involuntarily reproduces the experience of a previous similarly resonating event. In this way, the fiber network provides the physical structure not only for sensation but also for memory. Memory is the complexity of organization induced in a body by its prior experiences, the physical residue of the organism's history, which determines how it will react to future sensations. Memory is both the process of material analogy and the consciousness made possible by this processing. It provides the unity that makes the difference between aggregate and organism. It also makes possible the further aggregation of the new unity with others of its scale into superorganisms, and on up toward a vision of the universe as one giant body:

D'ALEMBERT: So what do you mean by your "individuals"? . . . There aren't any. No, there aren't any. . . . There is only one great individual; it is the whole. (138-139)

One might immediately ask, Isn't this the first suggestion of a vitalistic principle? Isn't it just another end run around the need for a dynamic principle, a god function with another name? Clearly not, and this is the answer to nineteenth-century qualifications of Diderot as a vitalist: In contrast to his that of predecessors, like d'Holbach or Helvétius, Diderot's sensibility is a function of the density of organization of a particular body. Rather than biologizing the

material world, Diderot realized a coherent mechanization of the living with his introduction of the notion of sensibility. The difference between the stone that does not think in Condillac's statue, whose outward shape only represents a man, and the stone that no longer carries that shape but does think when some of its substance is incorporated into the human being is that the human being's matter is extremely organized with respect to dynamic functioning. The "inorganic" is nonliving because it is not at that moment highly organized and thus not obviously responding dynamically to the movement around it. Inorganic and organic are merely the two extremes on a spectrum of density of organization. In this notion lay the audacity of Diderot's vision, in which the living is just the organized inorganic, one corner of the mechanophysical *great whole*. In this notion lay his synthesis of the mechanists and the physiologists.

In this light we can understand d'Alembert's protest in the very first lines of the work, that for Diderot, sensibility replaces God: Sensibility is the source of the structuring dynamic. Does this answer get us finally to the Spinozistic vision of an everywhere, everywhen, all-knowing, and all-powerful God made up of the entire universe? Not really. Diderot's vision was of an all-encompassing entity indeed, but a powerless and historically contingent one that "would be matter, within the universe, portion of the universe, subject to vicissitudes; it would age, it would die" (143). The only god possible in this world was not a ruling or decision-making god, the God of Newton's lawgiver. It was just one result of the natural tendency of the material world to organize itself and produce consciousness. This entity would be nothing more than a giant, irritable polyp.

D'ALEMBERT: I admit that a being that exists somewhere and who corresponds to no point in space; a being without extension who takes up space; who is entirely within each part of this extension; who differs essentially from matter and is unified with it; who follows it and moves it, without being moved; who acts on it and undergoes all its vicissitudes; a being of which I haven't the slightest idea; a being of such a nature is difficult to accept. But other obscurities await those who reject it. For after all, this sensibility that you substitute for it, if it is a general and essential quality of matter—the stone must feel.

DIDEROT: Why not?

—Denis Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, 89–90

However, against expectation, Diderot's materialism incorporated an idea of a natural good, and that idea was quite simple: It was what increases or produces balanced organization against the chance disturbance of chaos. Ethical categories, like natural laws, have to change to accommodate the physical changes in the world, to suit the new organization and dynamism the world embodies at any moment. Today's virtue may be tomorrow's vice,

today's vice may be tomorrow's virtue. But unlike *D'Alembert's Dream's* hypothetical and sad little universe-god, the mechanism to guide this evolution toward the increasing complexity that would provide a kind of insurance policy for survival of the hierarchy of organisms, did, for Diderot, exist. It was to be found in human communities: in secularized monasteries like the Academy of Sciences, or the group of authors writing the *Encyclopédie*. Immortal because the holders of memory are not only multiple but successive, organized by their interactions with each other, the older member of the community train their replacements before they themselves wear out. Like any Diderotian event-object, the intellectual community was to become a coordination of active individuals into a larger "body," persisting within a flow of material, Diderot's answer to Montesquieu's body of the state. The divine principle for Diderot was thus replaced by the principle of self-organization of the material world, contingent and open-ended. This model, a hybrid of the old university and the modern intellectual community, was to have a solid descent in the nineteenth-century universities, organized indeed by disciplines, but nonetheless understood as living institutions, whose whole was greater than the sum of their parts.

The *philosophes'* materialism can thus be divided into two quite different fields. The first was that of the mechanists, for whom the clockwork deterministic world displayed the laws that ruled its functioning. This type of materialism had the longer life and, suitably modified, led to the mind-set in most of the hard sciences of the French nineteenth century, to the theorization of the mechanical chemists, and eventually to the work of thinkers like Louis Pasteur or to the surprisingly pessimistic corpus of "engineering fiction" of Jules Verne. The other tradition, that of the even more radically atheist and materialist theoreticians of matter as motion, had a very different descent, feeding into many of the literary projects of the nineteenth century (those of Honoré de Balzac, Émile Zola's material social theories, and even, according to some, the historical materialism of Karl Marx). The first tradition, not easily separated from arguments about intelligent design, is still with us today, and many of those old issues have still not been resolved, as the debates around creationism and the anthropic principle in modern cosmology still attest. The second, more daring but less enduring, is present only in the theories of social virtue and in the institutions to which it gave rise but that have forgotten or discarded their earlier heritage, and in the debates about artificial intelligence and the creation of new forms of thinking beings.

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Bertrand Russell

Keith M. Parsons

BIOGRAPHY

Bertrand Arthur William Russell, son of aristocratic freethinkers (and free spirits) Lord and Lady Amberley, was born May 18, 1872. Orphaned prior to his fourth birthday, Russell was given a cold and traditionally pious upbringing in the home of his grandfather, eminent Victorian statesman Lord John Russell, and his grandmother, Countess Russell, a straitlaced Scottish Presbyterian. In 1890 he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, where he immediately distinguished himself academically, taking first-class honors in mathematics in 1893 and in moral science (philosophy) in 1894. In 1895 he was elected a fellow of Trinity College and, with his colleague G. E. Moore, was soon leading a rebellion against the Kantian and Hegelian style of philosophy then dominant in British universities. In collaboration with Alfred North Whitehead he wrote *Principia Mathematica*, a seminal work of mathematical logic, publishing the third and final volume in 1913.

Always notable for his social activism and engagement in public affairs, Russell opposed British involvement in World War I and was jailed in 1918 for published comments deemed injurious to the war effort. In 1931, upon the death of his older brother, he became Third Earl Russell, a distinction that as an opponent of the British class system, he always treated wryly. Russell won many high honors during a long, varied, and extremely productive academic and literary career, including election to the Royal Society in 1908 and the Order of Merit in 1949. He held many distinguished lectureships and professorships and produced a prodigious quantity of written work, including seventy-one books, twenty thousand letters, and innumerable articles and essays. All his writings, which cover an astonishing variety of subjects, are notable for their intellectual adroitness and scintillating style. As a professional philosopher, he

made important and original contributions to mathematical logic, philosophical logic, the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, epistemology, and metaphysics. In addition to his technical philosophical works, he published many popular writings dealing with controversial issues, some of which, like *Marriage and Morals*, deeply offended traditional moralists. The outraged traditionalists got their revenge in 1940 when a bigoted judge denied Russell a professorship at the City College of New York on the grounds that his appointment would constitute the establishment of a “chair of indecency.” During World War II, Russell lived in the United States and completed his massive *History of Western Philosophy*. In his later life Russell displayed remarkable vigor, even surviving without injury when in 1948, at the age of seventy-six, a plane crash dumped him into icy Norwegian waters. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950 and continued to publish prolifically into advanced old age. In the 1960s he achieved even greater fame as an activist against nuclear weapons and was arrested, when nearly ninety years old, while participating in a peace demonstration. He was married four times and had two sons and a daughter. His remarkable life came to an end on February 2, 1970, when he was in his ninety-eighth year.

RUSSELL ON RELIGION

Russell had a lifelong interest in religion and wrote about it extensively. Though his writings on religion were generally among his “popular” works, this does not mean that they were not intended seriously. On the contrary, Russell regarded religion as a vitally important subject, one of the most important for human well-being. Russell’s public image was that of a militantly antireligious gadfly, and to a considerable extent he lived up to that image. He was an incisive critic of religious dogma and eloquently argued that the teachings and practice of institutional religion have often been harmful. He saw all creeds as baseless and obscurantist. Traditional Christian morality, he argued, was both irrational and harmful, leading to personal unhappiness and social disruption. He hoped that as time went on, the advancement of science and the concomitant spirit of critical inquiry would make humanity less susceptible to the blandishments of religion. In all these ways, Russell carried on the skeptical, secularist, anticlerical tradition of his intellectual forebears of the Enlightenment, such as Voltaire, Thomas Paine, and David Hume.

Yet Russell’s views on religion were not one-dimensional, or uniformly hostile. Indeed, Russell’s daughter, Katharine Tait, regarded her father as a man of profoundly religious temperament, “who would have been a saint in a more believing age” (Tait, 184). Russell recognized that religion is a complex phenomenon that at its best, can inspire some of humanity’s worthiest thoughts and feelings. At its best, religion shakes us out of our self-absorption and pettiness and elevates us to a plane of universal compassion and disinterested

love. In the face of an indifferent cosmos, religion can impart the serene acceptance of the inevitability of suffering, loss, and death, yet also inspire the courage not to surrender to despair. The essence of religion does not lie in a creed or devotion to a god. Rather,

the essence of religion . . . lies in subordination of the finite part of our life to the infinite part. Of the two natures in man, the particular or animal being lives in instinct, and seeks the welfare of the body and its descendants, while the universal or divine being seeks union with the universe, and desires freedom from all that impedes its seeking. The animal being is neither good nor bad in itself; it is good or bad solely as it helps or hinders the divine being in its search for union with the world. In union with the world the soul finds its freedom. There are three kinds of union: union in thought, union in feeling, and union in will. Union in thought is knowledge, union in feeling is love, and union in will is service. (Seckel, 107)

So, for Russell, the authentically religious life repudiates dogma and false hopes, courageously accepts the transience and tragedies of life, and seeks union with the world through knowledge, impartial love, and service to humanity.

In the remainder of this chapter, I address what I consider Russell's most important thoughts on religion, focusing on three topics: his critique of the theistic arguments, his analysis of the effect of orthodox religion and theology upon morality and human welfare, and his view of the relation between religion and science. First, however, I ask whether Russell should be classified as an atheist or an agnostic.

A point to keep in mind when considering Russell's views on religion is that he lived nearly the first third of his long life in the age of Queen Victoria. For the Victorians, as for Dr. Square in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, "religion" meant the Christian religion and, specifically, Church of England orthodoxy. This brand of religion was naturally the sort that came to mind when Russell reflected on religious questions. So, when Russell spoke of "religion," he did not mean shamanistic, animistic, or "primitive" religion, and he had little to say about non-Western religions. He was generally thinking of Christianity and, in particular, its institutional, dogmatic, traditional, or orthodox forms.

As often as possible, I have let Russell speak for himself. He was one of the greatest masters of English prose, and no mere synopsis could do justice to the power and penetration of his writing.

AGNOSTIC OR ATHEIST?

Russell said that unlike the atheist, he did not claim to *know* that God does not exist but merely suspended judgment, and therefore he called himself an agnostic (Seckel, 73). However, he made it clear that when he said that he did not know that God does not exist, he meant that he lacked the sort of conclusive

disproof that would satisfy a philosopher (Seckel, 85). Therefore, he appears to have assumed (a) that an atheist is one who claims to know that God does not exist, and (b) that the atheist's claim should satisfy a philosopher if only it comes with a strict logical disproof. However, Russell said that if he were speaking to the "man in the street," he would probably call himself an atheist, since he regarded the existence of the Christian God as no more believable than the existence of Zeus, though, strictly speaking, he could not disprove the existence of either God or Zeus (Seckel, 85). But if an atheist is one who claims to know that God does not exist, did Russell mean that he would apply a different standard of knowledge when talking to nonphilosophers? Was he distinguishing two different senses of *know*, one strictly philosophical and requiring demonstrative proof, and the other nonphilosophical, requiring only the support of plausibility or probability arguments? Was he perhaps subtly shifting his ground and implicitly redefining *atheist*, not as one who claims to know that there is no God, but merely as one who disbelieves in God's existence? All this is confusing, to say the least.

In his comments comparing the Christian God to Zeus, Russell seems to have admitted that he did not really suspend belief but disbelieved in God just as he disbelieved in Zeus. The terms *theist*, *atheist*, and *agnostic* are now generally defined in terms of what one believes or does not believe, not what one claims to know or to prove. In a weaker sense, an atheist is one who does not believe in God; in a stronger sense, one who believes that there is no God (see Pojman). Russell appears to have qualified in both senses, so perhaps it would be more consonant with accepted usage to classify him as an atheist rather than an agnostic.

THE THEISTIC ARGUMENTS

Practically speaking, it makes little difference whether we call Russell an atheist or an agnostic. He held that there is no evidence of God's existence and generally gave short shrift to the traditional theistic arguments. Russell offered a brief critique of the theistic arguments in his famous essay "Why I Am Not a Christian," but his treatment there is rather thin and cursory, inviting the rebuke that his attitude toward these arguments was dismissive. Russell's most sophisticated critique of the theistic arguments is found in his debate on the existence of God with the Jesuit philosopher Frederick Copleston. Copleston, author of a standard multivolume *History of Philosophy*, clashed with Russell on a BBC radio program broadcast in 1948. Copleston offered arguments for the existence of God and Russell vigorously rebutted.

Copleston's first argument was the "argument from contingency":

The world is simply the real or imagined totality or aggregate of individual objects, none of which contain in themselves alone the reason for their existence.

There isn't any world distinct from the objects which form it, any more than the human race is something apart from its members. Therefore, I should say, since objects or events exist, and since no object of experience contains within itself the reason of its existence . . . the totality of objects, must have a reason external to itself. That reason must be an existent being. . . . So, I should say, in order to explain existence, we must come to a being which contains within itself the reason for its own existence, that is to say, which cannot not-exist. (Seckel, 124–125)

The putative being that is external to the universe and cannot not-exist is, of course, God.

As Russell noted (Seckel, 125), this argument raises so many points that it is difficult to know where to begin a rebuttal. Russell started by focusing on the idea of a being that cannot not-exist. Such a being would have to be a necessary being, but Russell countered that only propositions can be necessary:

The word “necessary,” I should maintain can only be applied significantly to propositions. And, in fact, only to such as are analytic—that is to say—such as it is self-contradictory to deny. I could only admit a necessary being if there were a being whose existence it is self-contradictory to deny. (Seckel, 125)

A proposition can be necessary in the sense that its denial entails a contradiction. Russell gave “Irrational animals are animals” as an example of such a necessary proposition (Seckel, 125). If you deny that irrational animals are animals, you simply contradict yourself, and a contradiction is necessarily false, so the proposition that irrational animals are animals is necessarily true. A necessarily true proposition is what logicians call an *analytic* or *tautological proposition*. But the proposition “God exists” does not appear to be analytic or tautological; it does not appear contradictory to assert that God does not exist. (There is, of course, the famous “ontological argument” that does try to prove God’s existence as a logical necessity, but this argument is a particularly fetid philosophical morass that Copleston wisely sidestepped.)

Copleston said, “If there is a contingent being then there is a necessary being” is necessarily true but is not a tautology (Seckel, 125–126). He seemed to mean that this proposition is necessary because to deny it is to deny an allegedly self-evident metaphysical principle. Though Copleston did not mention it by name, he apparently meant the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), originally articulated by the seventeenth-century philosopher Gottfried Leibniz. According to the PSR, nothing exists unless there is a sufficient reason for its existence. Further, everything that exists either is contingent (that is, it is not a sufficient reason for its own existence) or is a necessary being (that is, it is its own sufficient reason for being). A contingent being, one that is not its own sufficient reason, therefore owes its existence to something else—ultimately to a necessary being (an unending chain of contingent beings that did not terminate in a necessary being would leave the whole chain unexplained, so the argument goes). Therefore, if we accept the PSR, either the world, the

totality of all physical objects, must contain its own sufficient reason, or the world owes its existence to something else, a necessary being that is the sufficient reason for the world's existence.

But why accept the PSR? Why not regard the world itself—or perhaps whatever cosmologists postulate as its initial state or condition (initial singularity, quantum vacuum, or whatever)—as an ultimate brute fact, that is, as a primordial reality not explicable in terms of anything prior, deeper, or more basic? The motivation behind the PSR seems to be the demand that *everything* be intelligible. But if our explanations ultimately end with brute facts, then those brute facts will remain unexplained. It follows from the PSR that no particular contingent thing is satisfactorily explained until *all* contingent things are explained, and that the *total* explanation must appeal to something that is not contingent, something that is its own sufficient reason. Russell, however, rejected the PSR's demand for total explanation:

RUSSELL: But when is an explanation adequate? Suppose I am about to make a flame with a match. You may say that the adequate explanation of that is that I rub it on the box.

COPLESTON: Well, for practical purposes—but theoretically, that is only a partial explanation. An adequate explanation must ultimately be a total explanation, to which nothing further can be added.

RUSSELL: Then I can only say that you are looking for something that can't be got, and which one ought not to expect to get.

COPLESTON: To say that one has not found it is one thing; to say that one should not look for it seems to me rather dogmatic.

RUSSELL: Well, I don't know. I mean the explanation of one thing is another thing which makes the other thing dependent on yet another, and you have to grasp the sorry scheme of things entire to do what you want, and that we can't do. (Seckel, 129)

Russell's remarks prefigure philosopher J. L. Mackie's later critique of the PSR:

The principle of sufficient reason expresses a demand that things should be intelligible *through and through*. The simplest reply to the argument that relies on it [the PSR] is that there is nothing that justifies this demand, and nothing that supports the belief that it is satisfiable even in principle. . . . Any particular explanation starts with premises which state "brute facts," and though the brutally factual starting-points of one explanation may themselves be further explained by another, the latter in turn will have to start with something that it does not explain, *and so on however far we go*. But there is no need to see this as unsatisfactory. (Mackie, 85–86; italics in the original)

In short, there just is no basis for saying that nothing is adequately explained until everything is. As Mackie noted, explanation is *always* in terms of

something, which, at least temporarily, remains unexplained, but this state of affairs implies no inadequacy in our understanding. Further, it is doubtful that the demand for total explanation is even, in principle, satisfiable because it is not clear what it is for anything—including God—to be its own sufficient reason. Copleston said that God's self-sufficiency means that he "cannot not-exist" (Seckel, 125), and that God is a "being the essence of which is to exist" (Seckel, 128), but what do these cryptic comments mean? How is it that God's existence is uniquely self-sufficient in a way that no other putative ultimate reality is? Further, isn't saying that God's essence is to exist really just asserting that, after all, God's existence is *logically* necessary? If these questions have satisfactory answers, Copleston did not offer them.

Two anecdotes are always told about Russell, and both stories capture the wit, irreverence, and disdain for convention that made him loathed by some and admired by others. The first, almost certainly false, comes from Russell's unsuccessful attempt to establish a progressive private school where children would not be subjected to the usual stifling pedagogy. According to the story, the local rector paid a visit to the schoolhouse and rang the doorbell, and the door was opened by a naked little girl. "Good God!" gasped the rector. "There is no God!" retorted the girl and slammed the door in the astonished man's face. The second anecdote, probably approximately true, relates how Russell, when he was quite advanced in age, was asked how he would react if, after death, he found himself in the presence of the Almighty. His eyes lit up and he replied, "Why, I should say, 'God, you gave us insufficient evidence!'"

—Reported in the *New Yorker*, February 21, 1970, 29

In his summation at the end of the debate Russell said:

I don't admit the connotations of such a term as "contingent" or the possibility of an explanation in Father Copleston's sense. I think the word "contingent" inevitably suggests the possibility of something that wouldn't have this what you might call accidental character of just being there, and I don't think is true except in the purely causal sense. You can sometimes give a causal explanation of one thing as being the effect of something else, but that is merely referring one thing to another thing and there's no—to my mind—explanation in Father Copleston's sense of anything at all, nor is there any meaning in calling things "contingent" because there isn't anything else they could be. (Seckel, 145)

Russell appeared to be saying that any being—even God—would be contingent in Copleston's sense of not being the sufficient reason for its own existence. In other words, since theists insist that there is no external sufficient reason for God's existence, if he exists he must be a brute fact: He just is, and

that is all we can say. Therefore the sort of total explanation that Copleston sought is impossible, and it follows that the choice between theism and atheism comes down to a choice between ultimate brute facts—God or the universe—and there seems to be no rational reason to prefer one of these putative ultimate realities over the other. Since Copleston never explained what it would be for God to be his own sufficient reason, this round went to Russell.

Copleston's next argument appeals to religious experience:

By religious experience I don't mean simply feeling good. I mean a loving, but unclear, awareness of some object which irresistibly seems to the experiencer as something transcending the self, something transcending all the normal objects of experience, something which cannot be pictured or conceptualized, but of the reality of which doubt is impossible—at least during the experience. I should claim that cannot be explained adequately and without residue simply subjectively. The actual basic experience at any rate is most easily explained on the hypothesis that there is actually some objective cause of that experience. (Seckel, 134)

Copleston specified that he meant mystical experience—the experience of an indefinable and transcendent object—not visions or visual apparitions (Seckel, 134–135). So the argument from religious experience is an inference to the best explanation. The best hypothesis for explaining mystical experience, said Copleston, is the actual existence of a transcendent, objective cause. Russell was required to show that Copleston's explanation was deficient or that other explanations were at least equally reasonable.

Russell raised the obvious point that just because experiences have intentional objects—they seem to be experiences *of* something—does not mean that those objects actually exist. People sometimes fall in love with fictitious characters (Seckel, 135). Copleston agreed but said that the mystic's experience is different. Mystical experience has the power to inspire a life overflowing with “dynamic and creative love,” as we see in persons like St. Francis of Assisi, and the best explanation for such life-changing experiences is that they have an objective, transcendent cause (Seckel, 135). Further, someone who loves a fictitious character does not have the “irresistible impression that he's experienced in some way the ultimate reality” (Seckel, 137). Russell responded that the good moral effects of a belief are no evidence for its truth, and that a skillful writer can render characters so vividly that unless we know better, we can form the irresistible impression that they are real (Seckel, 137). In fact, such a belief has often occurred, as when people mistook Plutarch's vivid depiction of Lysurgus, the legendary founder of Sparta, as a description of a real person.

After this rather superficial exchange, the conversation about religious experience petered out. This topic was the low point in the debate for both Copleston and Russell. After his passionate defense of the argument from

contingency, Copleston here seemed half-hearted. Russell seemed content to score off debating points without really coming to terms with the deep issues. Copleston retrenched by saying that good effects are evidence not of the truth of the mystic's belief, but only of his sanity and truthfulness (Seckel, 136). But this statement conceded the point, since the honesty and sanity of the mystic were never at issue. Further, Copleston never met Russell's challenge to show that mystical experience is more reliable than the experience of someone, say, who is so vividly impressed by the Sherlock Holmes stories that he mistakes Holmes for a real person. So, though neither debater shone on this subject, the edge here, slightly, went to Russell.

After the tepid exchange on religious experience, the debate heated up again when the debaters turned to the moral argument:

The vast majority of the human race will make, and always have made, some distinction between right and wrong. The vast majority I think has some consciousness of an obligation in the moral sphere. It's my opinion that the perception of values and the consciousness of moral law and obligation are best explained through the hypothesis of a transcendent ground and an author of the moral law. (Seckel, 141)

Here again, Copleston was offering an inference to the best explanation.

Russell's reply was, first, that there is no identifiable universal or absolute moral law (Seckel, 141). If there were such a universal law, it would have to have some specifiable content, but when we look across cultures and through history, we find a great multiplicity of contradictory norms. For instance, at one time cannibalism was acceptable (Seckel, 141). Copleston replied that the fact of historical and cultural diversity in moral judgments does not mean that there is no true absolute law (Seckel, 141). Russell scoffed that in that case, the true moral law has been revealed to only a small portion of humanity, coincidentally including Copleston (Seckel, 141). Copleston admitted that societal norms reflect particular cultural and historical contexts, but he countered that when individuals criticize the accepted moral code of their own societies, which they sometimes do, they must appeal to an objective standard (Seckel, 141–142).

Russell thought that there was a naturalistic explanation of the sense of moral obligation: It was merely the inner sense of imagined approval or disapproval that we get by internalizing the teachings of parents and nurses (Seckel, 141–142). Copleston replied that moral obligation is a unique and basic concept that cannot be reduced to any other terms. For Copleston (Seckel, 142), moral obligation took the form of what Immanuel Kant called a "categorical imperative": the recognition that we are bound by universal and unconditional moral duties. Therefore attempting to explain our sense of moral obligation as "really" something else is not to explain it at all, but to explain it away, to turn it into something else, like a feeling of guilt or shame.

Copleston clearly won this round. Russell was certainly right: Indeed, it is an anthropological truism that norms vary across cultures. However, Copleston's claim was that those who reject the prevailing norms of their own time and place in the name of a higher morality—and these have included some of history's great spirits—do so by appealing to ideals of goodness and justice that transcend particular, culturally specific codes. Further, some acts, like Nazi atrocities, are clearly intrinsically reprehensible, regardless of how anyone feels about them (Seckel, 143). Copleston therefore held that we do acknowledge some objective, transcultural moral standards, and Russell never addressed this claim directly. Also, Russell failed to recognize that Copleston was not speaking of a *feeling* of moral obligation, like a sense of guilt or shame—which we might explain away in psychological terms—but was alleging an intellectual recognition of pure and unconditional duties, that is, that, as Kant claimed, we are aware of being bound by categorical imperatives.

RELIGION AND ETHICS

Though Russell did not adequately answer Copleston's points about ethics, some of his most effective criticisms of traditional religion involve the moral failings of creeds and churches. Russell charged that religious leaders and institutions have frequently promoted fanaticism and bigotry and that core religious doctrines are irrational and pernicious. He cited historical evidence that the effects of religion had often been very bad, leading to persecution, intolerance, and warfare. He also argued that religion had retarded moral progress, often fiercely opposing needed reforms. Russell further contended that the sins of religion could not be excused as due to a few aberrant "bad apples," as religious apologists often claim, but inevitably follow when intellectual independence is circumscribed by an imposed creed:

It is not so much that the creed of the Church is the wrong one. What is amiss is the mere existence of a creed. As soon as income, position, and power are dependent upon the acceptance of no matter what creed, intellectual honesty is imperiled. Men will tell themselves that a formal assent is justified by the good which it will enable them to do. They fail to realize that in those whose mental life has any vigor, loss of complete intellectual integrity puts an end to the power of doing good, by producing gradually and in all directions an inability to see truth simply. (Greenspan and Andersson, 155)

Requiring submission to a creed is the original sin of religion. The consequent corruption of intellectual integrity is the seed of all the evils that grow from religion.

Russell's moral critique of religion is often mordant in tone and anticipates the arguments of recent "new atheists" such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris. Yet Russell was no mere propagandist. He was certainly willing to recognize the good that religion had done:

Christianity, as soon as it conquered the [Roman] state, put an end to the gladiatorial shows, not because they were cruel, but because they were idolatrous. The result, however, was to diminish the widespread education in cruelty by which the populace of Roman towns was degraded. Christianity also did much to soften the lot of slaves. It established charity on a large scale, and inaugurated hospitals. Although the great majority of Christians failed lamentably in Christian charity, the ideal remained alive and in every age inspired some notable saints. In a new form, it passed over into modern liberalism, and remains the inspiration of much that is most hopeful in our somber world. (Seckel, 315)

Clearly, therefore, religion has done considerable good, but is there any reason to hold, as religious apologists and social conservatives still often do, that religion lays the moral foundation for society? Does the spread of unbelief weaken the ethical fiber of a people, undermining public morals and civility? Russell contended that an unbiased examination of the historical record discredits such notions. He argued that, on the contrary, the decay of dogma and the spread of free thinking are great boons. Traditional moralists decry the spread of freethought, said Russell, because they fear that people cannot be virtuous without religion (Seckel, 243). They tell us that only a God-fearing people will seek righteousness, and that only religion can steer us from sin to virtue.

The fear of hell, of course, is supposed to deter sin, but its putative efficacy as a deterrent is counterbalanced by its unquestionable harmfulness:

The motive of saving others from hell was urged as justification of persecution; for if a heretic, by misleading others, could cause them to suffer damnation, no degree of earthly torture could be considered excessive if employed to prevent so terrible a result. (Egner and Denonn, 135)

And further:

Kindliness and intelligence are the chief sources of useful behavior, and neither is promoted by causing people to believe, against all reason, in a capricious and vindictive deity who practices a degree of cruelty which, in the strictest mathematic sense, surpasses infinitely that of the worst human beings that have ever existed. (Seckel, 245–246)

But does hell at least prevent those who believe in it from doing wrong? Russell saw no evidence that it does. Forgiveness and absolution are always available for the penitent, especially those who are wealthy and powerful:

[Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire] Charles V, after spending the day conquering a Protestant city, felt that he had earned a little relaxation; he sent his servants out to find a virgin, and they found one of seventeen. Presumably she got syphilis, and the emperor got absolution. This is the system that is supposed to preserve men from sin. (Seckel, 245)

Russell might have added that since most people find it self-evident that God hates the same people they do, hardly anyone thinks that hell awaits *him*.

As for the claim that religion shows us the difference between virtue and sin, Russell found that theology is an unreliable guide, often burdening the conscience with spurious “sins”:

A Jew, when he ceases to be orthodox, may eat pork; a Hindu may commit the offense of eating beef. The Greek Orthodox Church considers it sin for godparents of the same child to marry; I will not deny that free thought may encourage this enormity. Protestants condemn amusements on Sunday, and Catholics condemn birth control; in these respects also free thought may be inimical to what bigots choose to call virtue. (Seckel, 245)

“Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course, over a deep ocean of anguish, reaching to the very verge of despair. . . . Love and knowledge, so far as they were possible, led upward toward the heavens. But always pity brought me back to earth. Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer. This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me.”

—Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography* 3–4

Yet, while condemning fake “sins,” churches have often winked at genuine atrocity:

Incredible misgovernment and cruelty was practiced by Leopold, King of Belgium, in the Congo. His government was so bad that in the course of ten years, the population was cut in half. In Belgium, these atrocities gradually became known. The Catholic Church supported the King, and the socialists, who were mostly freethinkers, attacked it. (Greenspan and Andersson, 100)

But did not Christianity civilize the barbarians, making them milder and less bellicose? Russell regarded this notion as simply ignorant:

The Roman state became Christian at the time of Constantine and was almost continually at war until it ceased to exist. The Christian states which succeeded it continued to fight each other, though it must be confessed, they also from time to time fought states which were not Christian. From the time of Constantine to the present day there has been no shred of evidence to show that Christian states

are less warlike than others. Indeed, some of the most ferocious wars have been due to disputes between different kinds of Christianity. (Seckel, 284)

Russell, of course, was aware that Rome was intensely warlike throughout its history. His point was that its conversion to Christianity did nothing to abate its truculence.

Not only is religion's claim to lay the foundation for morality deeply suspect, but it has also done much positive harm. According to Russell, religion is most pernicious when it sanctifies cruelty:

The harm that theology has done is not to *create* cruel impulses, but to give the sanction of what professes to be a lofty ethic, and to confer an apparently sacred character upon practices which have come down from more ignorant and barbarous ages. (Egner and Denonn, 106; italics in the original)

Indeed, religion has excused every kind of atrocity, even genocide, and the darkest human passions and prejudices have been wrapped in a mantle of holiness:

We read in the Old Testament that it was a religious duty to exterminate conquered races completely [e.g., I Samuel, 15:3], and that to spare even their cattle and sheep was an impiety. Dark terrors and misfortunes in the life to come oppressed the Egyptians and the Etruscans, but never reached their full development until the victory of Christianity. Gloomy saints who abstained from all the pleasures of sense, who lived in solitude in the desert, denying themselves meat and wine and the society of women, were, nevertheless, not obliged to abstain from *all* pleasures. The pleasures of the mind were considered to be superior to those of the body, and a high place among the pleasures of the mind was assigned to the contemplation of the eternal tortures to which the pagans and the heretics would hereafter be subjected. (Seckel, 291)

Russell cited Tertullian, one of the early "fathers" of Christian theology (Seckel, 292), who rejoiced at the thought of pagan philosophers writhing in the fires of hell. Cruel dogmas make cruel people.

One of the most destructive delusions is the idea that individuals and nations can be special instruments of divine will:

It was discovered, "after the fact," that Rome was destined by the gods for the conquest of the world. Then came Islam with its fanatical belief that every soldier dying in battle for the True Faith went straight to a Paradise more attractive than that of the Christians, as houris are more attractive than harps. Cromwell was persuaded that he was the Divinely appointed instrument of justice for suppressing Catholics and malignants. Andrew Jackson was the agent of Manifest Destiny in freeing North America from the incubus of Sabbath-breaking Spaniards. (Seckel, 300)

Many world events since the attacks of September 11, 2001, have underscored Russell's point.

Religious apologists attempt to extenuate the actions of inquisitors, witch-hunters, jihadists, crusaders, and fanatics as aberrations, deviations from the authentic religious message, which is allegedly one of love, tolerance, and peace. Russell was quick to counter that even the core teachings, those theologically essential for orthodoxy, are both unreasonable and harmful. For instance, there is the doctrine of hell, mentioned earlier. There is also the doctrine of free will, surely an essential tenet of many forms of traditional theism.

The theistic religions teach that humans are wholly responsible for their own evil choices and that God is therefore just in holding sinners morally accountable, even to the point of condemning them to eternal punishment. Such a doctrine implies that the will is free in the sense that our exercise of moral choice is incompatible with those choices' having been in any way determined by anything or anyone (except ourselves acting as autonomous agents). That is, when we act we cause things to happen, but nothing causes us to cause those happenings. On this "incompatibilist" view, the will is a sort of uncaused cause, and the human faculty of choice is therefore somehow independent of the nexus of physical law and causation that, so we assume, governs everything else. Some of the most prominent theistic philosophers continue to defend such an incompatibilist conception of free will (see, e.g., Plantinga, 1974). Russell regarded such a conception of free will as both unreasonable and harmful, and as springing from a vindictive desire to punish those we think wicked:

When a man acts in ways that annoy us we wish to think him wicked, and we refuse to face the fact that his annoying behavior is a result of antecedent causes which, if you follow them long enough, will take you beyond the moment of his birth. . . . No man treats a motor car as foolishly as he treats another human being. When the car will not go, he does not attribute its annoying behavior to sin; he does not say "You are a wicked motor car, and I shall not give you any more petrol until you go." He attempts to find out what is wrong, and set it right. An analogous way of treating human beings is, however, considered contrary to the truths of our holy religion. (Greenspan and Andersson, 180)

Russell did not deny that people must be held responsible in the sense that society has to have rules and laws, nor did he think that humans are merely automata, incapable of deliberate choice or voluntary action. His point was that the orthodox doctrine of free will, by regarding choice as a sort of uncaused cause, both justifies an ethic of retribution and obstructs the identification of the real causes of undesirable behavior.

Russell was particularly scathing about orthodox teachings on human sexuality. He held that early Christianity promoted an unhealthy view of sexuality by regarding perpetual virginity as ideal and marriage as a poor second best. (It is best to be celibate, says Paul, but "it is better to marry than to burn," I Corinthians 7:9.) Indeed, said Russell, orthodox Christianity has

viewed all sexual desire with suspicion, even within marriage, and this view has led to bad consequences:

The Christian view that all intercourse outside marriage is immoral was . . . based upon the view that all sexual intercourse, even within marriage, is regrettable. A view of this sort, which goes against biological facts, can only be regarded by sane people as a morbid aberration. The fact that it is embedded in Christian ethics has made Christianity throughout its whole history a force tending towards mental disorders and unwholesome views of life. (*Marriage and Morals*, 48)

How sound was Russell's critique of the religious record? He was sometimes unfair, occasionally engaging in special pleading (see Brightman, 544). Also, his enormous rhetorical skills all too often got the better of good judgment, leading him to overstate and oversimplify. Popular works on topics as controversial as religion, whether written by apologists or skeptics, are prone to rhetorical overheating. Yet an admirer of Russell might invoke a *tu quoque*: Russell's polemic was certainly no more biased or unfair than the apologetic of influential Christian writer C. S. Lewis (see Beversluis, 2007). Because Russell's writings on religion were written in a "popular" idiom, historical claims are often anecdotal and generally undocumented. However, several more recent scholarly books substantiate many of his charges (see Wood, Ranke-Heinemann, and Carroll).

SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Where did Russell stand on the vexed question of the relation between religion and science? A casual reader might take him as a die-hard proponent of the "warfare" model, which regards science and religion as natural enemies, so that one advances at the expense of the other. This view was promoted by such nineteenth-century writers as Andrew D. White and John William Draper, but it is roundly rejected by recent historians of science (see Lindberg and Numbers). Russell certainly held that religion and science had conflicted and would continue to conflict as long as religious creeds opposed the findings of science. Russell would have had no patience for Stephen Jay Gould's proposal that science and religion are "nonoverlapping magisteria," that is, that there is no conflict because science concerns matters of fact, while religion has authority over questions of value (see Gould, 1999). Some prominent theistic philosophers support Russell's view that conflict is inevitable. Alvin Plantinga acknowledges that scientific claims sometimes oppose what Christians "know" to be the case.

Russell held that religious claims should be debunked when they conflict with scientific knowledge. Yet, as we noted, Russell recognized that religion is a complex phenomenon, and that it encompasses more than creeds.

Religion also involves modes of experience, such as the many varieties of mystical experience, and the universal love and compassion of a St. Francis or a Gandhi. The progress of science will not oppose such experiences and may liberate them from their association with stultifying dogmas:

In so far as religion consists in a way of feeling, rather than in a set of beliefs, science cannot touch it. Perhaps the decay of dogma may, psychologically, make such a way of feeling temporarily more difficult, because it has been so intimately associated with theological belief. But this difficulty need not endure forever; in fact, many freethinkers have shown in their lives that this way of feeling has no essential connection with creed. No real excellence can be inextricably bound up with unfounded beliefs; and if theological beliefs are unfounded, they cannot be necessary for what is good in the religious outlook (Egner and Denonn, 17–18)

Russell therefore held that the “warfare” was not between science and religion *per se*, but between science and superstition. Of course, defenders of orthodoxy deny that their creeds are dispensable superstitious detritus, so there is no alternative except to fight it out with them.

The basic clash between religious creeds and science is only secondarily a disagreement over particular claims. Primarily, it is a disagreement about the nature of knowledge:

A religious creed differs from a scientific theory in claiming to embody eternal and absolutely certain truth, whereas science is always tentative, expecting that modifications in its present theories will sooner or later be found necessary, and aware that its method is one which is logically incapable of arriving at a complete and final demonstration. (Egner and Denonn, 14)

Russell was not making the obviously silly claim that religious people are always dogmatic or that scientists are always ideally open-minded. He was noting that creeds, by their very nature, make claims that are intended to be absolute and apodictic. The Nicene Creed, for instance, was offered not as a tentative or hypothetical claim, but as a conclusive and authoritative statement, as well as an implicit condemnation of contrary claims as heretical. Science, on the other hand, owes its undeniable success to the fact that however pigheaded individual scientists might be, scientific communities have an admirable—though, of course, inconsistent—record of subjecting theories to rigorous empirical evaluation and rejecting those that come up short.

Science, said Russell, endorses a different ideal of truth than that enshrined in religious creeds:

Science thus encourages the abandonment of the search for absolute truth, and the substitution of what might be called “technical” truth, which belongs to any theory which can be successfully employed in inventions or in predicting the future. “Technical” truth is a matter of degree: a theory from which more

successful inventions and predictions spring is truer than one which gives rise to fewer. "Knowledge" ceases to be a mental mirror of the universe, and becomes merely a practical tool in the manipulation of matter. (Egner and Denonn, 15)

I do not think that Russell was here endorsing a pragmatist conception of truth, a view he sharply criticized elsewhere (e.g., *A History of Western Philosophy*, 817). Perhaps he was proposing the antirealist view, more recently articulated by Bas Van Fraassen, that the goal of theorizing is not truth—mirroring reality—at all, but empirical adequacy, that is, propounding theories that are compatible with all observations and experiments. At any rate, Russell's point seems to have been that the articulation of absolute and final truth is the aim of systems of religious dogma, but that such an aim is alien to the spirit of science, which has the much more modest aim of articulating theories that predict the data.

What are the specific points of conflict between scientific theory and religious creed? Russell died in 1970, before the rise of "scientific creationism" in the 1980s and "intelligent design theory" in the 1990s. He therefore treated the conflict between evolution and religion as a dead issue, like the controversy over Galileo. However, he noted other points of controversy that were alive when he was writing in the 1920s and 1930s and that are still contentious today. Neuroscience and the other sciences of the mind and brain were in their infancy seventy-odd years ago when Russell published *Religion and Science*, yet he already understood very clearly the threat that such advancing knowledge posed to orthodox accounts of the mind and soul.

Traditional theology implies a certain theory of mind, one largely influenced by Platonism. According to this theory, characteristically "mental" phenomena, such as consciousness, willing, remembering, and perceiving, are states or activities of an incorporeal soul, an entity that, though it is associated with a body during earthly life, is capable of separate and continued existence after the body's demise. Indeed, this disembodied yet sentient soul will exist eternally, either joyously in heaven or in sorrow and torment in hell. Yet, as Russell noted, progress in the scientific study of the brain and mind render such an image of mind highly problematic if not simply incoherent.

Consider postmortem survival, for instance:

If we are to believe in the survival of a personality after the death of the body, we must suppose that there is continuity of memories or at least of habits, since otherwise there is no reason to suppose that the same person is continuing. But at this point physiology makes difficulties. Habit and memory are both due to effects on the body, especially the brain; the formation of a habit may be thought of as analogous to the formation of a water-course. . . . The continuity of a person throughout the life of his body, if, as I contend, it depends on habit-formation, must also depend upon the continuity of the body. It would be as easy to transfer a water-course to heaven without loss of identity as it would be to transfer a person. (Egner and Denonn, 141–142)

A disembodied soul without your habits and memories just would not be *you*. But if habits and memories are caused by externally conditioned functional dispositions of portions of your neural anatomy, as seems to be the case, then it becomes as difficult to imagine a disembodied soul having your habits and memories as it is (modernizing Russell's example) to imagine a disembodied iPod playing your favorite tune. The vast amount that we have learned in the past seventy years about the neurophysiological basis of mental phenomena greatly strengthens Russell's case. If the characteristic mental activities, such as thinking, perceiving, willing, remembering, and imagining, are really things that we do with our brains, as they seem to be, then such paradigmatic mental activities are really activities of the body, like singing or exercising. In that case, it is as hard to imagine a soul thinking, willing, or feeling as to picture one doing handsprings or jumping jacks.

Another way that science potentially undermines religion is by undercutting the idea of cosmic purpose. Central to many religious perspectives is the supposition that the cosmos exists to produce human beings, or at least sentient, intelligent, humanlike creatures. The idea that the universe has no overall purpose, and that humans are therefore an unintended consequence of impersonal causes and laws, is antithetical to many religious worldviews. Russell's criticisms of the idea of cosmic purpose are trenchant and relevant to current discussions. He addressed a particular kind of theology that sees the process of evolution and the history of life as aspects of an unfolding divine plan that ultimately aims at us. His arguments are equally applicable to the "old-earth" creationist view that accepts the antiquity of the earth (as opposed to the fundamentalist "young-earth" creationists, who espouse an Old Testament timescale of six to ten thousand years). Both theistic evolutionists and old-earth creationists face the problem of explaining why, if God's ultimate intention was the production of humanity, there should have been vast geological ages prior to the appearance of humans, and why, during those ages, there should have been enormous quantities of natural evil that apparently contributed nothing to the purported final purpose:

If God really thinks well of the human race—an implausible [*sic*] hypothesis, as it seems to me—why not proceed, as in Genesis, to create man at once? What is the point of the ichthyosaurs, dinosaurs, diplodochi [*sic*], mastodons, and so on? . . . The purpose of the tapeworm is a mystery. What useful purpose is served by rabies and hydrophobia? It is no answer to say that the laws of nature inevitably produce evil as well as good, for God decreed the laws of nature. The evil which is due to sin may be explained as the result of our free will, but the problem of evil in the pre-human world remains. . . . An omnipotent Being who created a world containing evil not due to sin must Himself be at least partially evil. (Egner and Denonn, 194)

Instead of an intelligent designer, the creator of such a cosmos would seem to be the mad, bad inventor of a sort of cosmic Rube Goldberg device, a mechanism

that employs insanely complicated, wasteful, and pointless means to accomplish something that could have been done much more simply.

In Russell's view, the basic problem in accounts of cosmic purpose is that at bottom, they rest upon monstrous egotism:

Is there not something a trifle absurd in the spectacle of human beings holding a mirror before themselves, and thinking what they behold so excellent as to prove that a Cosmic Purpose must have been aiming at it all along? Why, in any case, this glorification of Man? How about lions and tigers? They destroy fewer animal or human lives than we do, and they are much more beautiful than we are. How about ants? They manage the Corporate State much better than any fascist. Would not a world of nightingales and larks and deer be better than our human world of cruelty and injustice and war? The believers in Cosmic Purpose make much of our supposed intelligence, but their writings make one doubt it. If I were granted omnipotence, and millions of years to experiment in, I should not think Man much to boast of as the final result of all my efforts. (Egner and Denonn, 221–222)

It would be quite wrong to dismiss these comments as flippant, as if Russell were here merely indulging in a bit of mock misanthropy to achieve a scintillating putdown. I think these comments were intended, and should be taken, as entirely serious. Indeed, the only reason that I can see why this is not recognized as a very powerful objection to theories of cosmic purpose is that people are blinded by the anthropocentric chauvinism that Russell decried.

Russell held that science, at least since Copernicus, had tended to undermine human egotism, to push us to the realization that we are not, either literally or figuratively, at the center of the cosmos. Russell thought that this abandonment of anthropocentrism, implied by the development of science, was the most reasonable and healthiest way of viewing humanity:

Man, as a curious accident in a backwater, is intelligible: his mixture of virtues and vices is such as might be expected to result from a fortuitous origin. But only abysmal self-complacency can see in Man a reason which Omnipotence could consider adequate as a motive for the Creator. The Copernican revolution will not have done its work until it has taught men more modesty than is to be found in those who think Man sufficient evidence of Cosmic Purpose. (Egner and Denonn, 222)

In conclusion, Russell's view of the relationship between religion and science was not an unqualified "warfare" account, but he did hold that religion often offended against science, and when it did, he was an unabashed defender of the rights of science. Optimists would like to say that the major conflicts between religion and science are a thing of the past, and they want to follow Stephen Jay Gould in saying that such conflict was all along due to a regrettable misunderstanding. Russell's polemic punctures the optimist's balloon, and perhaps this is a good thing. Recent years have seen an extreme politicization of

the debates about science, and science has been subjected to strident intellectual attack from ideologues of the left and the right (see Mooney and Parsons). There can be no doubt that religion motivates much of the current animus against science. In such a climate, voices like Russell's need to be heard.

CONCLUSION

Russell was born at the height of the Victorian age, and his critique of religion is reminiscent of the polemics of the great freethinkers of the nineteenth century, such as T. H. Huxley and Robert G. Ingersoll. The basic charges are simple and straightforward: Orthodox religion inculcates creeds that are intellectually baseless and morally pernicious; the intellectual arguments for theism are empty rationalizations; orthodoxy, though it poses as the guardian of morality and decency, has a long and disgraceful record of promoting intolerance and atrocity; traditional religious creeds are obscurantist dogmas that oppose scientific, social, and moral progress.

Such an old-fashioned critique sounds quaint to the ears of many more recent and allegedly more advanced thinkers. Postmodernist academics are likely to regard Russell's exaltation of science and rationality as a genuflection to another sort of orthodoxy. Yet the tide may be turning. The fiery critiques of recent "new atheists," such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens, are written in a polemical idiom that Russell would have found congenial. These works have sold remarkably well. Perhaps people are sickened by rabidly sectarian suicide bombers or repulsed when God's name is invoked by politicians of even greater than usual mendacity and hypocrisy. Perhaps scientists and intellectuals are, belatedly, awakening to the fact that the Enlightenment ideals of rationality and free inquiry are not necessarily permanent gains but in real danger of annulment by fundamentalists and fanatics. If the tide is indeed turning, then Russell's critique and those written in a similar spirit will once again be welcome in the forefront of debate.

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Carl Sagan

John Shook

Carl Edward Sagan was born on November 9, 1934, to a Jewish family in Brooklyn, New York. After receiving a PhD in astronomy and astrophysics from the University of Chicago in 1960, he worked at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and lectured at Harvard University from 1962 to 1968. Moving to Cornell University, where he was a professor of astronomy and space sciences until his death on December 20, 1996, Sagan directed the Laboratory for Planetary Studies and also served as associate director of the Center for Radio Physics and Space Research. He was awarded many honorary doctorates and numerous scientific honors, including the Public Welfare Medal from the National Academy of Sciences in 1994. Rationalist, skeptic, and humanist organizations also recognized his work. Sagan was voted Humanist of the Year in 1981 by the American Humanist Association and was a Humanist Laureate in the International Academy of Humanism.

Sagan was one of the greatest popularizers of science and advocates for the naturalistic worldview during the second half of the twentieth century. His stature was grounded in his significant contributions to astronomy, astrochemistry, exobiology, and the U.S. Space Program. Sagan is credited with predicting the high surface temperature of Venus, the existence of oceans on Saturn's moon Titan and Jupiter's moon Europa, and the presence of organic molecules on Titan, and with explaining some atmospheric features of Venus, Mars, and Jupiter. His path-breaking research on the extraterrestrial origin of life, showing how radiation can produce amino acids from common chemicals, converged with his curiosity about alien civilizations. Sagan helped Dr. Frank Drake compose a radio signal message about Earth and humans, broadcast into space by the Arecibo telescope in 1974. Sagan also designed the first physical message sent into deep space, a plaque attached to Pioneer 10 in

1972; he then developed the record disc sent with the Voyager probes in 1977. As an adviser to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration since its beginnings, Sagan discussed space and lunar conditions with astronauts and assisted with many robotic missions to the moon and to other planets. He was a cofounder (1980) and the first president of the Planetary Society, and his promotion of the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) was essential to its progress in the 1980s and 1990s.

During the 1970s, as Sagan achieved fame through his television appearances and his popular books discussing science, astronomical discoveries, and planetary exploration, he often voiced philosophical stances relating science's value and humanity's moral progress. He was uniformly optimistic that expanding knowledge was essential to human welfare, that space exploration would be crucial for the human spirit, and that ET communication would be beneficial to human wisdom. Already in *The Cosmic Connection* in 1973, Sagan strongly connected technological progress with moral and spiritual advancement, suggesting that older alien civilizations will be more powerful and more ethical, maintaining galactic highways using black holes and erecting welcome signs to young civilizations. These themes structure his 1985 novel, *Contact*, adapted into a 1997 motion picture (winning the 1998 Hugo award).

Our future lies with intelligence and technology alone, Sagan again emphasized throughout *The Dragons of Eden* (published in 1977 and winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1978), so primitive and magical notions will become extinct. *Broca's Brain* is even more explicit: Since the only path for human progress is that of science and technology, all religions, mysticisms, and pseudosciences must give way. Sagan admitted that this struggle will not be easy:

But religions are tough. Either they make no contentions which are subject to disproof or they quickly redesign doctrine after disproof. The fact that religions can be so shamelessly dishonest, so contemptuous of the intelligence of their adherents, and still flourish does not speak very well for the tough-mindedness of the believers. But it does indicate, if a demonstration were needed, that near the core of the religious experience is something remarkably resistant to rational inquiry. (*Broca's Brain*, 284)

Sagan's 1980 television series *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage*, cowritten with his third wife, Ann Druyan, for the Public Broadcasting Service, portrayed the exploration of space as the next stage of humanity's natural evolution. What is this cosmos awaiting us? Sagan declared, "The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be" (*Cosmos*, 4). By 1980, Sagan's commitment to naturalism and his hostility to religion could not have been clearer: Nowhere in this cosmos is there anything divine or godlike, and myths about gods beyond the cosmos only express dreams and wishes; therefore religious notions have no rational basis or justification.

In the early 1980s, Sagan's optimistic approval of technological progress turned sour, and his thoughts on humanity's moral progress took an intriguing turn. While his writings of the 1970s mention concerns about pollution, overpopulation, and nuclear weapons, these were peripheral to his staunch defense of science. Sagan's post-1980 writings use a different argumentative strategy. His passionate advocacy of scientific knowledge and the public understanding of science became motivated by his conviction that abundant ignorance, irrationalism, dogmatism, and hatred now possessed the tools to destroy the world and obstruct the peaceful colonization of space. Reasoning that few advanced civilizations would be detected (despite the probability that many thousands should populate the typical galaxy) if they tend to self-destruct, he worried about humanity's own future. Global warming alarmed him, as did the small possibility that an asteroid could again hit the earth. Sagan promoted environmentalism and animal protection, protested nuclear weapon proliferation, and proclaimed the likelihood—which he was among the first to calculate—that a large-scale nuclear war would cause severe atmospheric damage and render Earth uninhabitable for humans. He believed that the nations of the world, in their competitive race for resources, prestige, and power, were playing a dangerous game that the whole planet must lose. He felt that people sensed this danger, felt intellectually inadequate (as scientific illiteracy persisted), and reacted emotionally with primitive responses. The light of knowledge was then threatened, too:

Whenever our ethnic or national prejudices are aroused, in times of scarcity, during challenges to national self-esteem or nerve, when we agonize about our diminished cosmic place and purpose, or when fanaticism is bubbling up around us—then, habits of thought familiar from ages past reach for the controls. The candle flame gutters. Its little pool of light trembles. Darkness gathers. The demons begin to stir. (*Demon-Haunted World*, 26–27)

Sagan's expanded crusade against superstition and pseudoscience, expressed in essays during the 1980s and early 1990s and collected in 1996 in *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* and in 1997 in *Billions and Billions: Thoughts on Life and Death at the Brink of the Millennium*, condemned any departure from the strict and demanding method of controlled experimental testing for all theories. "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," he frequently reminded his audiences. Alarmed by the popularity of notions such as spiritualism, astrology, parapsychology, UFOs, extraterrestrial visits, and ever-mutating cults of superstition and mysticism, Sagan applauded the debunking work of scientific skeptics and contributed his own critical essays. Science must not ignore pseudosciences, he advised, but instead contest them with rational arguments. His participation in some debates drew criticism from the scientific community, but Sagan held that science's supreme virtue was its capacity for critical inquiry into all questions

and its self-correcting process of evaluating and reevaluating all hypotheses in light of evidence.

Yet religion remained a fascinating topic for Sagan. While his supreme confidence in science's ability to discover the truth never wavered, Sagan's attitude toward religion underwent a transformation during the crucial years 1984 and 1985. In 1984 Sagan was completing his novel *Contact*, in which religious believers are uniformly portrayed as dogmatic fools, and religion receives only skepticism and contempt from the novel's heroine, Dr. Eleanor Arroway. One of the largest contrasts between the novel and the motion picture twelve years later lies in the intelligent and dignified role given to the preacher who debates with Dr. Arroway. But Sagan's attitude toward religion had already been changing by the time the original book was published. Although many of the arguments against religion heard in *Contact* are repeated in his 1985 Gifford Lectures (titled "The Search for Who We Are" and published in 2006 as *The Varieties of Scientific Experience: A Personal View of the Search for God*), the lectures conclude on a more conciliatory and cooperative level. Sagan attributed to religion a crucial value for promoting morality, at a time when humanity desperately needed the right ethical ideals. No longer could humanity afford a protracted war between science and religion, with the entire fate of the species and the planet hanging in the balance. Science and religion should share the responsibility of stewardship for the future of human life on earth and in space. Where religions could support this stewardship, agreeing that creation should be protected and that nations should end hostilities, Sagan welcomed their help. An essay in *Billions and Billions*, titled "Religion and Science: An Alliance," praises scientific and religious leaders jointly committed to the sacred value of earthly life. Yet how could such antagonistic realms of human belief really work together?

Sagan viewed religions as fossilized reactions to once-awesome experiences. For people now seeking the greatest amazement, science's knowledge more than suffices. In the words of his heroine in *Contact*, "There's wonder and awe enough in the real world. Nature's a lot better at inventing wonders than we are."

NEITHER THEIST NOR ATHEIST

The complexities of Sagan's relationship with religion begin with his consistent denials, first, that he ever believed in God or anything supernatural, and second, that he was an atheist. These denials are easily consistent with each other because of the precise way that Sagan defined atheism. He explained in 1979, "An atheist is someone who is certain that God does not exist, someone who has compelling evidence against the existence of God. I know of no such

compelling evidence” (*Broca’s Brain*, 311). Sagan emphasized the scientific attitude of skepticism rather than the dogmatic attitude of certainty. One of Sagan’s Gifford Lectures in 1985, on “The God Hypothesis,” surveys unpersuasive arguments for God, concluding in sympathy with the skepticism expressed by Protagoras: “About the gods I have no means of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist or what they are to look at” (*The Varieties of Scientific Experience*, 168). An interviewer in 1996 related how Sagan insisted that any belief could be questioned, even religious belief, and then said, “An atheist has to know a lot more than I know. An atheist is someone who knows there is no God” (Achenbach). When asked directly about his personal religious beliefs in another 1996 interview, Sagan replied, “My view is that if there is no evidence for it, then forget about it. An agnostic is somebody who doesn’t believe in something until there is evidence for it, so I’m agnostic” (Dawson). Sagan’s refusal to hold any religious beliefs was complete and steadfast, so in a different sense of . denoting a person who does not believe in anything supernatural, he clearly qualified as an atheist.

Sagan’s rejection of God was based on his scientific standard of requiring enough empirical evidence and his view that no evidence for the existence of God has withstood critical examination. None of the traditional arguments can demonstrate the existence of God or even raise the possibility of God’s existence to an interesting level. Sagan treated traditional arguments for God as shaky leaps of inference undertaken when little knowledge of nature was available. Since religion and science share the common goal of understanding our place in the universe, Sagan perceived science’s successes as replacing religion’s foundations: “As we learn more and more about the universe, there seems less and less for God to do” (*Broca’s Brain*, 286). Even the very existence of the universe needs no supernatural explanation: “In many cultures it is customary to answer that God created the universe out of nothing. But this is mere temporizing. If we wish courageously to pursue the question, we must, of course, ask next where God comes from? And if we decide this to be unanswerable, why not save a step and conclude that the universe has always existed?” (*Cosmos*, 257). Furthermore, there are numerous naturalistic explanations for the allegedly miraculous events and phenomena that inspire religious faith. Naturalistic hypotheses that could explain paranormal or mystical experiences are available, Sagan argued. Intrigued by experiments with psychedelic drugs that trigger mystical trances and may revive memories of one’s birth, he proposed that revelatory visits with spirits, contacts with extraterrestrials, and out-of-body experiences are generated by a brain’s own processes.

Recognizing that the power of religious conviction is primarily about satisfying deeply moral, spiritual, and emotional needs, Sagan resisted the temptation to dismiss those needs, which are universally and permanently human: “There is no question that religion provides a solace and support, a bulwark in times of emotional need, and can serve extremely useful social roles” (*Broca’s Brain*, 289). But once again, science is capable of replacing religious mythology

"We are the custodians of life's meaning. We long for a Parent to care for us, to forgive us our errors, to save us from our childish mistakes. But knowledge is preferable to ignorance. Better by far to embrace the hard truth than a reassuring fable. If we crave some cosmic purpose, then let us find ourselves a worthy goal."

—Carl Sagan, *Pale Blue Dot*, 57.

by stimulating and satisfying most of those needs as well: "Science is not only compatible with spirituality; it is a profound source of spirituality. When we recognize our place in an immensity of light-years and in the passage of ages, when we grasp the intricacy, beauty, and subtlety of life, then that soaring feeling, that sense of elation and humility combined, is surely spiritual. . . . The notion that science and spirituality are somehow mutually exclusive does a disservice to both" (*Demon-Haunted World*, 29–30). Like other scientists impressed by the awe aroused by contemplating the enormity, complexity, and beauty of the universe, Sagan ascribed to science inspirational powers that had been reserved for religion: "It is very hard to look at the beauty, intricacy, and subtlety of nature without feeling awe. I don't think even the word reverence is too strong" (Wakin, 19).

Sagan amply recognized religion's many useful functions. Religions "can provide in a very significant way, and without any mystical trappings, ethical standards for adults, stories for children, social organization for adolescents, ceremonials and rites of passage, history, literature, music, solace in time of bereavement, continuity with the past, and faith in the future" (*Varieties of Scientific Experience*, 188). The ability of religion to defend moral principles especially impressed Sagan, an ability that he nowhere credited to science. Could science's inspiration of awe and reverence toward the natural be compatible with religion's imperative of respect and duty toward the sacred? Sagan not only drew attention to that very compatibility but also went further to recommend that their teamwork could prove essential to humanity's future.

THE SEARCH FOR WHO WE ARE

Sagan's last book provides his most extensive and intense thought on religion and science. *The Varieties of Scientific Experience: A Personal View of the Search for God* was published in 2006, but its contents were written for presentation in 1985, as his Gifford Lectures in Natural Theology at the University of Glasgow in Scotland. The invitation to give the Gifford Lectures, awarded to many of the greatest thinkers since 1888, is a most prestigious honor. Each speaker applies the best knowledge of his or her field, frequently

philosophy and religion but occasionally the natural or social sciences, to perennial questions about the human spirit and the divine realm. Like Arthur Eddington and Niels Bohr before him, Sagan sketched out current scientific knowledge and pondered its implications for the religious life. Sagan's ten lectures were filed away for years after his death, until his widow, Ann Druyan, edited them for publication.

Sagan's original title for his lectures was "The Search for Who We Are." Druyan explained in her introduction that she had selected a new title for the book in honor of William James's 1902 Gifford Lectures on "The Varieties of Religious Experience." Druyan also changed the titles of some of the lectures. Sagan's first four lectures describe how science works and its current understanding of the cosmos, and then they explain why organic matter and life, including intelligent life, is probably abundant across the trillions of galaxies. Sagan's fifth chapter, "Extraterrestrial Folklore: Implications for the Evolution of Religion," cautions us to be skeptical about UFOs and alien visitations. People are too easily deceived, and only the fallible scientific method should be trusted. Sagan's sixth lecture, "The God Hypothesis," elaborates his agnosticism. He dismissed as hardly persuasive the major arguments for the existence of God and then sympathized with several arguments against God's existence. The final third of *The Varieties of Scientific Experience* yields Sagan's positive speculations about religion and its future. Sagan's own titles for his last four lectures were "The Enterprise of the Planets," "Crimes against Creation," "To Preserve a World Graced by Life," and "The Search for Who We Are." After Druyan's editing, they became three chapters titled "The Religious Experience," "Crimes against Creation," and "The Search." Druyan concluded the book with transcripts of selected vibrant exchanges between Sagan and questioners from the audience.

Natural theology is supposed to inspire true religion by excluding appeals to special revelation and personal testimony. Only reasoned knowledge, potentially available to any inquirer, is supposed to be relevant. This requirement presented both limitations and opportunities for Sagan. Like Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James, Sagan believed that religious experience is essential to religion, and also that the sciences will probably explain why people have religious experiences. Sagan offered some examples of scientific explanations for religion, just as suggestive hypotheses hardly proven, but still capable of portending science's eventual absorption of religion into its own naturalistic worldview. Among his examples are the sociological notion that religion helps strengthen political dominance structures; the psychological notion that people gain comfort from an imagined relationship with a powerful god because of entrenched childhood memories of powerful adults; and the neurophysiological notion that religious experiences are simply caused by certain chemicals in the brain (maybe a "theophorin" molecule, teased Sagan). Sagan had little difficulty with crediting naturalistic causes for religious belief.

"Freedom of religion, one of the rocks upon which the United States is founded, is essential for free inquiry. But it does not carry with it any immunity from criticism or reinterpretation for the religions themselves. The words 'question' and 'quest' are cognates. Only through inquiry can we discover truth."

—Carl Sagan, *Broca's Brain*, 311.

Despite his skepticism, Sagan did not want our appreciation of religious experience to disappear in the way that appreciation of revelation or miracles should disappear in the bright light of science. He wanted to preserve religious experience because he found it essential to religion, and he did not desire religion's extinction. Human beings really need religion, according to Sagan. What could be so important about the sort of belief system that has not yet been justified by any rational, evidenced-based argument? Well, the extinction of the human race would be important, yes? He wrote, "It seems to me that there are many respects in which religions can play a benign, useful, salutary, practical, functional role in the prevention of nuclear war" (*Varieties of Scientific Experience*, 205).

William James was also vitally interested in the utility of religious conviction. His version of that philosophy called *pragmatism* holds that a religious belief is reasonable if that belief serves vital needs of the individual or the species in the long run. Sagan, too, was worried about humanity's long run, since global hatreds and world-destroying weapons might close down humanity's short run on the cosmic stage. As a pragmatic humanitarian, he urged us to elevate our mean perspective. If only we would see in other people a common humanity. If only we cared more for humanity's long-term success here on earth (and other planets, someday). If only we could see how fragile and precious our planet is. If only we would listen to the wisdom of our inner conscience. If only we had the moral courage to act on our conscience. Religions, suitably revised to eliminate undesirable features, could encourage these ideals in us. Sagan hoped that we could be modified to a higher consciousness and conscience by a higher religion. We could take control of our religious evolution, instead of letting traditional religions control us. After all, why discard such a potentially useful tool as religious belief? Sagan reminded us that some religions have advanced human dignity and political rights: "Religions and religious leaders have played very important roles in getting the human species out of situations that we should have never gotten into that profoundly compromised our ability to survive, and there is no reason religions could not in the future take on similar roles" (*Varieties of Scientific Experience*, 206).

Why did Sagan appeal to religion as if it were a vital necessity, even in our hour of need? Why should we have to construct a new religion from such

disreputable parts? Sagan told us, “A religion old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge” (*Pale Blue Dot*, 52). In *The Varieties of Scientific Experience* Sagan told us the essential features of such a valuable religion: It has to inspire us to follow our high ideals while following science’s knowledge of the cosmos. But the objection could be raised that if we already know what ideals we ought to follow, and where to get information about the cosmos, then what does the religious aspect of the new creed contribute? Either the religious aspect will add some supernatural overbelief that can’t be rationally justified, or it simply will exalt our moral ideals or our scientific knowledge. If Sagan wanted us to be agnostics like himself, the first option is ruled out. So then the “religious” will just be identified with either our admiration for our moral ideals or our admiration for our scientific knowledge, or both. Many philosophers have already tried to reduce religion to moral ideals to maintain the Enlightenment wall between science’s facts and religion’s values. But Sagan charted a more complicated route: He wanted the scientific experience of contemplating the cosmos to arouse the religious experience of enthusiasm for just the right moral ideals we now need to survive.

Ultimately, Sagan’s overall philosophy is oriented around the highest value he placed in humanity’s own future. Our deepest problems and conflicts, he suggested, are caused by the current crowded and sedentary situation in which humanity temporarily finds itself. One planet cannot and should not contain us. What is this human future that deserves our most strenuous efforts to ensure? Sagan told us that we must become more like the wonderfully advanced alien civilizations that he imagined populating the galaxies. Fortunately, the human species is already highly adaptable for a wandering existence:

It will not be we who reach Alpha Centauri and the other nearby stars. It will be a species very much like us, but with more of our strengths and fewer of our weaknesses, a species returned to circumstances more like those for which it was originally evolved, more confident, farseeing, capable, and prudent—the sorts of beings we would want to represent us in a Universe that, for all we know, is filled with species much older, much more powerful, and very different. (*Pale Blue Dot*, 398)

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Leslie Stephen

S. T. Joshi

Leslie Stephen (1832–1904), although perhaps best known today as the querulous and demanding father of Virginia Woolf, whom she portrayed somewhat harshly in the character of Mr. Ramsay in her 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*, was one of the towering British intellectuals of his period. He would deserve to be remembered for no other reason than for his editing of the immense reference work *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885f.), for his pioneering treatise *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), and for his numerous critical and biographical essays on British and European writers; but he is now coming to be admired for advocating a vigorous and intellectually cogent brand of agnosticism in a series of essays from as early as 1868 up to the time of his death. Many of his essays trenchantly take religious orthodoxy to task, including such prominent religious thinkers of the day as Edward Pusey, Matthew Arnold, and John Henry Newman; and his refutation of some of the central defenses for religious belief in an age of science paved the way for the agnosticism or outright atheism of such later thinkers as Bertrand Russell and of his own daughter, Virginia Woolf, whose philosophical and religious outlook was more affected by her father's writings than she sometimes acknowledged.

BIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

Stephen was born on November 28, 1832, in a suburb of London. His father, James Stephen, was a longtime civil servant and a fervent member of the Evangelical movement, an offshoot of Anglicanism that emphasized a personal connection with Jesus and an emphasis on the moral rehabilitation of society. Under this influence, James Stephen helped to write the bill that

outlawed slavery in the United Kingdom. (Leslie Stephen's grandfather, Jem Stephen, had married the sister of William Wilberforce, a clergyman who had led the movement toward the abolition of slavery in England.) Leslie was no doubt imbued with Evangelicalism during his childhood, but he does not appear to have been a particularly devout believer. Late in life Stephen commented on the evolution of his skepticism:

When I ceased to accept the teaching of my youth, it was not so much a process of giving up beliefs as of discovering that I had never really believed. The contrast between the genuine convictions that guide and govern our conduct, and the professions which we were taught to repeat in church, when once realised, was too glaring. One belonged to the world of realities and the other to the world of dreams. (Stephen, *Social Rights and Duties* [1896]; quoted in Maitland, 133)

The contrast between the beliefs that one merely talks about and those that actually govern one's conduct would become a central issue in Stephen's agnostic writings.

Stephen attended Eton (1842–1846) and, after several years of private tutoring, entered Trinity Hall, Cambridge, in 1850, initially studying mathematics. It was at this time that he became an enthusiast of healthful living, devoting much of his time to competitive rowing; later in life he would become a devotee of Alpine mountain-climbing and write much on the subject. In 1854 he won a fellowship at Cambridge that would allow him to teach, but it required him to take holy orders. In contrast to Oxford, however, where John Henry Newman and others were leading a fervent renewal of religious belief that would come to be called the Oxford Movement, Cambridge did not strongly emphasize religion, and Stephen took holy orders the next year largely as a means of advancing his career. By the late 1850s Stephen had begun to read philosophy, especially the work of the positivist Auguste Comte, and it was largely through this influence, rather than that of the advancing scientific thought of the day as embodied in Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), that Stephen's skepticism developed. Accordingly, in 1862 he announced that he could no longer conduct chapel services and therefore felt compelled to resign his fellowship.

This decision further clarifies the nature and evolution of Stephen's shedding of religious belief. His early biographer, F. W. Maitland, cited a college friend (without naming him) as remarking:

When I first went up [to Trinity Hall], Stephen was a clergyman and took his part in the clerical services in chapel. I was a grieved witness to the misery endured by my friend during the time when doubt as to the truth of revealed religion according to the orthodox view gradually increased, until he made up his mind that his views were incompatible with his continuing to be a clergyman of the Church of England. The pain he suffered was very acute, as was sure to be

the case when a highly sensitive and loving nature like his had to pass through such a crisis of life, and was made doubly so because he knew what grief his determination would cause to some of his family who were nearest and dearest to him. (146)

This passage puts a somewhat different complexion on Stephen's own assertions that his disbelief was a largely intellectual matter unencumbered with emotional trauma; but no doubt he was well aware that his giving up holy orders would cause great distress to his family, in particular to his devout father.

Stephen decided to pursue a career in journalism in London. Through the influence of his brother, James Fitzjames Stephen (later to become a prominent lawyer and judge), he began writing for such leading intellectual journals as the *Saturday Review*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and the *Cornhill Magazine*. His increasingly skeptical writings on religion, however, could find a haven only in such periodicals as *Fraser's Magazine* and the *Fortnightly Review*, edited by the secularists James Anthony Froude and John Morley, respectively. In 1871 he became editor of the *Cornhill*, publishing in it many of the substantial literary essays that would later be collected in *Hours in a Library* (1874–76) and *Studies of a Biographer* (1898). In 1873 his early agnostic articles were collected in *Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking*, although the volume attracted little attention at the time.

In 1867 Stephen married Harriet ("Minnie") Thackeray, daughter of the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray. Minnie died in 1875, leaving Stephen (who was indeed of a "highly sensitive" nature) shattered. After a long courtship, he married Julia Duckworth (a young widow with three children) in 1878. They would have four children: Vanessa, Thoby, Virginia, and Adrian. It was during this period that Stephen wrote his landmark treatise, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, an exhaustive study of the British deists and their influence. Stephen materially assisted in the resurrection of the reputation of these thinkers, who had fallen into obscurity and disrepute. Although removed as editor of the *Cornhill* in 1882, he continued to work prolifically, even a bit frenetically, especially when a publisher, George Smith, commissioned him to edit the enormous reference series *Dictionary of National Biography*, a work that remained standard for more than a century, until its wholesale revision in 2004.

Along with his critical and biographical essays, Stephen wrote monographs on Samuel Johnson (1878), Alexander Pope (1880), Jonathan Swift (1882), George Eliot (1902), and Thomas Hobbes (1904) for the prestigious English Men of Letters series. His later writings on religion were gathered in *An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays*, although a number of essays remain uncollected. His later treatise, *The English Utilitarians* (3 volumes, 1900), was an impressive philosophical study of Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, and their disciples. Stephen's later life, however, was saddened by the death of

his wife, Julia, in 1895, and during his final years he put increasing demands on his children to care for his needs. Stephen, although liberal in many facets of his thought, remained curiously conservative as far as women's place in society was concerned: He was opposed to woman suffrage and did not believe women to be the intellectual equals of men. But his careful education of his two daughters would bear rich fruit, both in the novelist Virginia Woolf and in the painter Vanessa Bell. Leslie Stephen died on February 22, 1904.

"Virginia Woolf's harsh portrait of her father (as Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*) as a self-absorbed, tyrannical, and dictatorial man is well known: 'To pursue truth with such astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings, to rend the thin veils of civilization so want only, was to her so horrible an outrage of human decency.' But Woolf, in discussing her parents with Vita Sackville-West, said, 'I was more like him than her I think; and therefore more critical; but he was an adorable man, and somehow, tremendous.'"

—Annan, *Godless Victorian*, 135

FROM FAITH TO AGNOSTICISM

Stephen's evolution from a fairly orthodox faith to full-fledged agnosticism was gradual, if his published writings are any gauge. In "The Broad Church" (published in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1870), one of his first essays on religion, he asserted, "The greatest danger to which we are exposed at the present moment is not that people find the old faiths failing them, but that they begin to doubt that there is anywhere such a thing to be found as faith in anything" (*Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking* [hereafter *Essays*], 8–9). This statement suggests that Stephen still believed that faith in something—whether it be a religious dogma or a series of moral stances—is conceivable and desirable. In another early essay, "The Religious Difficulty" (*Fraser's Magazine*, 1870), Stephen still advocated Bible teaching to children (626), even though he was no doubt well aware that such teaching could easily lead to indoctrination so that subsequent attempts to gauge the metaphysical and moral claims of the Bible would become difficult. Even in this essay Stephen went on to say, "The Church, in short, acquires a very great and real influence by having entrusted to it the management of the chief system of national education; and it is the sense that such an influence really exists which gives the chief bitterness to the struggle between secularists and denominationalists" (629).

Stephen was, however, well aware that Christianity in general, and Anglicanism in particular, was increasingly under attack, and that it was, as early as the 1870s, a minority view among the intellectual classes. He himself stated

plainly that he was an “agnostic,” adding somewhat frustratingly that “for reasons which I need not here discuss I do not consider myself to be an atheist” (“Mr. Bradlaugh and His Opponents,” 178). It is possible that Stephen simply did not wish to declare *publicly* that he was an atheist, given that certain social and legal disabilities still existed in England for those who openly professed atheism; certainly, his agnosticism leaves little room for even the mathematical possibility of a god, and he is likely to have been the sort of agnostic who, as Bertrand Russell later remarked, “is, for practical purposes, at one with the atheists” (Russell, 81).

Stephen took note of the widespread prevalence of atheism in Europe (“Religion as a Fine Art” [1872], *Essays*, 43ff.). In the trenchant essay “Are We Christians?” (1873), Stephen addressed the German skeptic David Friedrich Strauss’s claim that intellectuals must abandon Christianity entirely. In mulling over Strauss’s query “Are we still Christians?” Stephen wrote:

The “we” of whom he speaks belong to the class—a class, he adds, no longer to be counted by thousands—to whom the old faith and the old Church can no longer offer a weatherproof refuge. The majority even of this class would be content to lop off the decayed bough, trusting that there is yet vital power in the trunk. But there is a minority, and it is in their name that Strauss speaks, who think that, in giving up the old supernaturalism, they must also take final leave of the worship to which it alone could give enduring power over the souls of men. . . . The attempts to effect a compromise between Christianity and Rationalism are nothing but a lamentable waste of human ingenuity. (*Essays*, 110–111)

That final statement is still a reflection of Strauss’s view and not necessarily of Stephen’s; but in the course of his career it became plain that Stephen was more and more inclined to adopt it himself.

Stephen recognized that Christians were on the defensive. There were those who, rather than say that the Bible was true, asserted merely that “its falsehood cannot be mathematically demonstrated” (“The Broad Church,” *Essays*, 10). Others claimed that religion was a kind of “fine art,” but even a religion conceived of in this fashion cannot be “entirely divorced from reality” (“Religion as a Fine Art,” *Essays*, 62). One of the main enemies of religion, as Stephen knew, was science; and he defended the findings of science, where they could be definitively ascertained, against religious obscurantism. He admitted that he had been present at the celebrated meeting of the British Association at Oxford when Thomas Henry Huxley made his vigorous defense of Darwin’s theory of evolution against the attacks of Bishop Samuel Wilberforce:

It was one incident in a remarkable outburst of intellectual activity. The old controversy between scientific and ecclesiastical champions was passing into a new phase. Darwin’s teaching had not only provided a fresh method, but suggested applications of scientific principles which widened and deepened the

significance of the warfare. A “new reformation,” as Huxley afterwards called it, was beginning, and the intellectual issues to be decided were certainly not less important than those which had presented themselves to Erasmus and Luther. (“Thomas Henry Huxley,” 905)

Stephen disavowed A. J. Balfour’s assertion—an anticipation of the views of Stephen Jay Gould—that theology and science rest “upon separate bases” (“Philosophic Doubt,” 158), asserting, “Every theological system includes at least a large mass of purely scientific statements” (162), which can be criticized by the rules of science. Theologians erred, in Stephen’s view, when they spoke dogmatically about issues on which there was no sound knowledge. Theology, in many particulars, was merely “bad science” (166).

What, then, was there left to believe? One would think that the essay “The Religion of All Sensible Men” (1880) would provide an answer, but Stephen danced around the subject. He began by postulating the queries “What form of belief will satisfy at once the philosophic thought and the popular impulses of the time? How is it to attract at once the thinkers, whose sole aim is the extension of our narrow circle of intellectual daylight, and the poor and ignorant, who are moved only by the power of the creed to grasp their imaginations and stimulate their emotions?” (*Agnostic’s Apology*, 350–351). When the question is expressed in this way, it is not surprising that Stephen could not come up with a coherent answer. The best he could say was that the evolution of a new and sounder religion—or the evolution of a worldview not based upon religion at all—would be a long and slow process, since “you can’t change a man’s thoughts about things as you can change the books in his library” (376).

THE SKEPTICISM OF BELIEVERS

One of the cleverest of Stephen’s strategies against his religious opponents was to undercut their ground by declaring that they themselves had unwittingly lapsed into agnosticism. Stephen knew that dogma—unequivocal statements about the nature of entity, which were offered without proof and must be accepted without question—was central to religion; but it was exactly in regard to certain central dogmas of Christianity that science and philosophy had had their most corrosive effects. The result, in many cases, was that the devout resorted to a deliberate vagueness in doctrine, so that disproof becomes difficult. As Stephen stated in “The Broad Church”:

The Atonement is spiritualised till it becomes difficult to attach any definite meaning to it whatever. The authority of the Bible becomes more difficult to define and to distinguish from the authority of any other good book. Everlasting punishment is put out of the way by the aid of judicious metaphysical distinctions.

The sharp edges of old-fashioned doctrine are rounded off till the whole outline of the creed is materially altered. (*Essays*, 31)

“Are We Christians?” makes the same argument even more trenchantly. There were those, Stephen maintained, who now espoused something called “unsectarian Christianity” as a means of escaping from both the strictures of science and the battle of various sects and denominations, but this stance really amounted to “scepticism in a gushing instead of a cynical form” (*Essays*, 119). Stephen went on to say, “Unsectarian Christianity can no more exist than there can be a triangle which is neither scalene nor isosceles nor equilateral. All Christians might conceivably be converted to one sect; but if you strip off from the common creed all the matters which are in dispute between them, the residuum is at most the old-fashioned deism, if, indeed, it amounts to that” (*Essays*, 119). He concluded devastatingly:

The doctrine, turn it how you will, is essentially sceptical . . . for it amounts to saying that the doctrines which were the very life-blood of the old creeds which once stirred men’s hearts to flame, are to be respectfully and civilly shelved, and that morality can do very well without them. It is the product of intellectual indolence, though not of actual intellectual revolt. We have not the courage to say that the Christian doctrines are false, but we are lazy enough to treat them as irrelevant. (*Essays*, 122)

“No! . . . we are not Christians. . . . A great number call themselves Christians, because, in one way or another, the use of the old phrases and the old forms is still enforced by the great sanction of respectability; and some for the higher reason, that they fear to part with the grain along with the chaff; but such men have ceased substantially, though only a few have ceased avowedly, to be Christian in any intelligible sense of the name.”

—Leslie Stephen, “Are We Christians?,” *Essays on Freethinking and Plainspeaking*, 154.

The 1876 essay “An Agnostic’s Apology” points to the paradoxes in the position of theists (whom Stephen named Gnostics [those who know], in contrast to agnostics), who on the one hand maintain that “God is knowable” (*Agnostic’s Apology*, 3) but then turn around and say that many of his acts are a “mystery” to limited human minds: “You say, as we say, that the natural man can know nothing of the Divine nature. That is Agnosticism. Our fundamental principle is not only granted, but asserted” (8).

“The Scepticism of Believers” (1877) declares pithily that “faith often means belief in my nonsense; and credulity, the belief in the nonsense of somebody else” (*Agnostic’s Apology*, 43). It is deists and skeptics who have “forced”

(66) theists to modify their views and to abandon some of the harsher aspects of their faith. One of these is religious persecution. In the 1883 essay “Poisonous Opinions” Stephen addressed the issue of whether it is ever morally right to persecute beliefs in the name of religious orthodoxy. He concluded that such persecution, when directed toward scientific facts (such as Darwin’s theory of evolution, assuming it had been proven to the point where it could be declared, for all practical purposes, a fact), was both unwise and ineffective: These facts are not independent entities but form a complex network intertwined with other facts. As civilization advances, persecution becomes anachronistic and inefficient; it constitutes a futile attempt to return to a prior stage of human society. In disputing the view that religious toleration is “opposed to the ‘principle of authority’” (*Agnostic’s Apology*, 295), Stephen retorted, “Toleration is, in fact, opposed to any authority which does not rest upon the only possible ground of rational authority—the gradual agreement of inquirers free from all irrelevant bias, and therefore from the bias of sheer terror of the evils inflicted by persons of different opinion” (296).

THE CRITICISM OF RELIGIOUS THINKERS

Many of Stephen’s essays are extraordinarily acute analyses of the views of a wide variety of religious thinkers ranging from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Some of these essays reveal a dry wit that underscores their religious iconoclasm. In a lengthy and seemingly reverential essay on the tortured Christian Blaise Pascal, Stephen concluded that Pascal “was a sincere, a humble, and even an abject believer precisely because he was a thorough-going sceptic” (“Pascal” [1897], 16). An essay on Jonathan Edwards, the fire-and-brimstone preacher of eighteenth-century America, is similar. Seeing Edwards as the link between Puritan theocracy and the transcendentalism of Emerson, Stephen appeared to treat Edwards with respect, although his scorn of Edwards’s belief in hell—a doctrine that, in another essay, he referred to as “inconceivably repulsive in its more intense forms” (“Dreams and Realities” [1878], *Agnostic’s Apology*, 96)—and other dogmas is evident. He made the further point that this belief in hell cannot be restricted merely to religious fundamentalists like Edwards but is a central tenet of mainline Protestantism and Catholicism as well.

In “Mr. Maurice’s Theology” (1874) Stephen treated the religious philosophy of the mild-mannered thinker Frederick Denison Maurice. F. W. Maitland quoted Stephen’s remark, “I was for a time a disciple of Maurice” (152), which makes Stephen’s condemnation of Maurice’s thought all the more interesting. In essence, Stephen criticized Maurice for advocating a Christianity whose dogmatic structure had been deliberately obscured. He provided examples of Maurice’s equivocations: “The Bible is inspired; but ‘every other book is part of the same divine institution.’ Miracles are wrought by the divine

power; but all the ordinary operations of nature testify to the same hand” (613). Stephen was led to the following conclusion:

He is trying to reconcile two radically incompatible tendencies. Every formula is worthless in itself, and then appears to be of infinite value when rightly interpreted. His Deity is the infinite and incomprehensible being who dazzles the inner eye of the mystic, and then the definite or anthropomorphic god of Christian dispensation and of Jewish mythology. To meet the philosopher this theology expands without bounds; to meet the ordinary British Christian it confines itself within the historical limits. (613)

“Mr. Matthew Arnold and the Church of England” takes the great British critic (and author of the 1873 *Literature and Dogma*) to task. Arnold had asserted that “all who believe in right reason, culture, and enlightenment should endeavour to maintain the Church of England as a national institution” (415). Why? Because Dissenters (the British term for members of Protestant sects other than the Church of England) tended to promote strife, jealousy, and other reprehensible things. But Stephen retorted that this accusation could be made against Protestants as a whole. Dissenting sects, in Stephen’s view, were a natural consequence of an established church. Arnold wanted the Church of England to remain united with the state, but Stephen maintained that the church was now just another sect—so why should it have this kind of undue influence?

But Stephen’s favorite whipping-boy was John Henry Newman, the devout Oxford theologian who had progressed from an ardent “high church” Anglicanism to full-fledged Catholicism, becoming a cardinal in his later years. Two essays—“Newman’s Theory of Belief” (1877) and “Cardinal Newman’s Scepticism” (1891)—address Newman’s views, and several other essays refer to him in passing. Stephen’s general view was that Newman espoused skepticism without realizing it. In “Newman’s Theory of Belief,” Stephen maintained that Newman never made an attempt to defend his religion (whether Anglicanism or Catholicism) by direct argument; instead, he adopted a historical point of view, referring to the “development” of Christianity over the centuries. Summarizing Newman’s views, Stephen wrote, “If we assume that creeds live in proportion to the amount of truth which they contain, the plainest facts written on the very surface of history will tell us which are the truest” (*Agnostic’s Apology*, 188). The very fact that Christianity had endured so long was, in Newman’s view, a testament that it contained some kind of “truth.” But Stephen pointed out that this argument was a highly dangerous one for the religious thinker to rely on; for if pushed to its logical extreme, it showed that Christianity was, in fact, in decline as a “vital” force (among the intelligentsia, at any rate), and that it was therefore yielding to agnosticism or actual atheism as the dominant creed of the present and future. As Stephen remarked in the essay “Belief and Conduct,” the fact that Christianity had lasted for nearly two thousand years suggested that it had some kind of “utility”;

but its recent decay suggested that “the belief will not work” (379) anymore, at least for a widespread segment of the population.

“Cardinal Newman’s Scepticism” points out that Newman’s views of the Bible (found in some of the papers in *Tracts for the Times*)—including such views as that the Bible is not one book but “a great number of writings, of various persons, living at various times, put together into one, and assuming its existing form as if casually and by accident,” and that it does not contain any discussion of some of the central tenets of Christian belief, such as infant baptism—“may be as good a persuasive to scepticism as to belief” (180). The only way Newman could get around the difficulties posed by the actual text of the Bible was to appeal to the “authority” of the church—specifically, the Catholic Church, which he saw was the only institution that could trace its lineage in an unbroken chain back to the time of Jesus. But as Stephen pointed out, there are two kinds of authority: the authority based on scientific or historical evidence and the authority based on coercion. It was only the latter kind of authority that the Catholic Church could espouse, especially as embodied in the notion of papal infallibility, which Newman had by this time embraced. This kind of “authority” could lead only to persecution.

RELIGION AND MORALITY

Some of Stephen’s most valuable essays are those that make the case—albeit tentatively and hesitantly—that religion and morality are not indissolubly linked, and that morality must stand independent of religion if society is to advance. This was a remarkably bold stance on Stephen’s part, for the religious basis of morality was one of the final areas on which the devout could base their case for the “utility” of religion, and few thinkers could conceive of an ethical system that did not rely on religion in some fashion or other. One of Stephen’s first forays into this subject was “The Scepticism of Believers,” in which he maintained that the agnostic “wishes . . . to place morality on a scientific basis” (*Agnostic’s Apology*, 71). Moral laws had, historically, been arrived at inductively, rather than by an appeal to authority. Morality, in fact, could not be (and had not been) founded upon theology, but upon “a knowledge of the concrete constitution of human nature and society” (78).

Stephen’s central essay on the subject is “Belief and Conduct” (1888). Here he asked plainly: Is religion useful, all apart from its truth? Is it essential to morality? In discussing the theologian William Paley’s belief that “the essence of virtue consists in obedience to an external sanction,” Stephen asked a series of increasingly awkward questions:

Let us look for a moment at Paley’s logic. Why should I not lie? Because liars will be damned. How do you know that? By a divine revelation made by the founder of my religion. How do you know that it was a divine revelation?

Because I can prove that certain miraculous events happened in Palestine eighteen centuries ago. Upon this showing the pyramid is balanced upon its apex, and morality in most precarious equilibrium; its very existence is made to depend upon the evidence of a particular set of events at a particular period of history. (373)

In fact, morality (in the West) was not *caused* by a belief in Christianity, because both the history of Christianity and the moral doctrines actually found in the Bible are not such as to conduce to a moral life. Why had Christianity not made people—even professed believers—behave in a more moral manner than, as history showed, they actually had? What, in fact, were the actual implications of Christian morality? Were they not a series of incoherencies and paradoxes?

I am—according to that mythology—an infinitesimal agent in a world governed by unlimited power working upon inscrutable principles. If I am good, I must give the glory to the being who has bestowed his grace upon me and refused it to my neighbour; if I am bad, I may plead that I was tempted by supernatural malice and cunning. I may be forgiven because somebody else has suffered, and punished by a suffering which has no proportion to my offence or relation to my reform. (388)

Stephen concluded resoundingly, “Of all the illusions patronised by philosophers, there is none more baseless, as it seems to me, than the notion that morality is dependent upon speculative opinions. The facts of human nature lie below the theories” (388).

CONCLUSION

The totality of Leslie Stephen’s writings on religion is an impressive achievement. His most recent biographer, Noel Annan, wrote, “There has never been much doubt that, second only to Arnold, Leslie Stephen was the outstanding critic of late Victorian times” (*Godless Victorian*, 322), although Annan was referring exclusively to his literary criticism; but a good case can be made that Stephen’s essays on religion were critical in paving the way from the somewhat tentative agnosticism of Thomas Henry Huxley to the open defiance of Christianity found in many of the early-twentieth-century thinkers, from Bertrand Russell to H. L. Mencken. Stephen, learned in the sciences as well as in literature and philosophy, was able to integrate the findings of contemporary science and to grasp their implications for religious belief. His carefully argued essays, devastating in their exposure of the logical fallacies of his opponents but expressed with a studied politeness that eschews all forms of cheap cynicism or polemic, exercised a profound influence in showing that agnosticism was not only an intellectually cogent but a morally sound stance. His broaching

of the notion of a morality independent of religion was far ahead of its time, and as a whole his writings still have much to teach us in regard to the proper role of the intellectual when facing the conflict between the dogmas of religion and the necessarily tentative findings of science and history.

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Mark Twain

Richard Bleiler

It is just possible that Samuel Langhorne Clemens might object to being included in a volume devoted to religious unbelievers. As a child, he was taught the tenets of Methodism in Sunday school, after which he attended a Presbyterian church, and though he rapidly lost faith in these particular brands of Christianity, he never seems to have become what we would today describe as an absolute atheist. Even during his thoroughly embittered final years, when he was racked with despair and unhappiness, angrily mocking fundamentalists for their unthinking faith, frequently cursing God and damning Jesus for his personal unhappinesses and miseries, he remained obsessed with the nature of God and the Godhead, explicitly denying Christianity while continuing to accept and advocate a Supreme Being. Indeed, very late in his life, in a series of autobiographical dictations, he discussed the two Testaments and their depictions of the Deity, stating that the Old Testament's portrait of God

is substantially that of a man—if one can imagine a man charged and overcharged with evil impulses far beyond the human limit; a personage whom no one, perhaps, would desire to associate with, now that Nero and Caligula are dead. In the Old Testament His acts expose His vindictive, unjust, ungenerous, pitiless and vengeful nature constantly. [Though this God] is a fearful and repulsive character, He is at least consistent. He is frank and outspoken. He makes no pretense to the possession of a moral or a virtue of any kind—except with His mouth. . . . I think He comes infinitely nearer to being respectable than does His reformed self, as guilelessly exposed in the New Testament. (*The Bible According to Mark Twain*, 319, 321)

Nevertheless, while entirely dismissive of Christians and the Bible, Twain claimed that when one considers

the real God, the genuine God, the great God, the sublime and supreme God, the authentic Creator of the *real* universe, whose remotenesses are visited by comets only, [one cannot] associate with Him anything trivial, anything lacking grandeur. We cannot conceive of His passing by Sirius to choose our potato for a footstool. We cannot conceive of His interesting Himself in the affairs of the microscopic human race. (322–323)

These are not the comments of an atheist; rather, they are the opinions of someone who has remained at the core a believer in a supernatural (theistic) creative force. Clemens never seems to have moved beyond this intellectual stage; indeed, if a simple belief in a Supreme Being (as opposed to blind faith in the inerrancy of the Bible) is necessary for being a Christian, it may be reasonably claimed that Clemens adhered to Judeo-Christian tenets and remained a Christian throughout his life. It is very probable that Clemens would object to this assessment rather more strongly than he would object to being classed as an atheist.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born on November 30, 1835, in Florida, Missouri, the sixth child of John Marshall and Jane Lampton Clemens. His lawyer father, rigid, stern, and austere, died when Samuel was but twelve. Samuel's subsequent maturation was guided by his mother, who was from all accounts lively and compassionate and the source of many of Twain's female characters. She was a powerful personality, and there is still academic debate over whether her forcing her eighteen-year-old son to swear never to drink or gamble was overly protective, crimping his spirit, or was simply the action of a caring mother. It was Jane Clemens who, following the death of her husband, joined the local Presbyterian church and took her children, including Samuel, to its services. She remained a significant part of Samuel's adult life, dying in 1890 at the age of eighty-six. Twain died at his home, "Stormfield," in Redding, Connecticut, on April 21, 1910.

Research into the life and thinking of Mark Twain can be problematic, for the texts of Twain's most intimate writings are far from established or fixed, and more than half the works currently published and available as by "Mark Twain" were left unpublished during his lifetime, were composed and revised over many years, and were often the recipients of posthumous editorial attentions that significantly altered them. Indeed, even the work commonly referred to as his *Autobiography* was composed in fits and starts between 1870 and 1910 and now exists in four different published versions: the two-volume version prepared by Albert Bigelow Paine in 1924; *Mark Twain in Eruption*, prepared by Bernard DeVoto in 1940; the edition prepared by Charles Neider published first in 1959; and the separately printed chapters containing extracts first published in the *North American Review* in 1906 and 1907 that have also been printed as part of Mark Twain's autobiography. All versions of the *Autobiography* have very different contents, as do the different editions of Twain's *Notebooks*, and attempts to reconcile the various editions and personae

of these writings, and to establish consistency in the presentation of ideas, are frustrating and ultimately futile, for Twain was not only a mercurial personality, he was also one who was not inclined to let facts stand in the way of an amusing bon mot or a pet peeve.

For all that different versions of the *Autobiography* are available, only Neider's version contains Twain's numerous assessments of Christianity and its practitioners, and while one cannot use the *Autobiography* to determine exactly when Twain began to have his doubts about faith, it is certain that early in life he came to associate religion with enslavement, horrible suffering, hypocrisy, and death. As a child he learned that the local church "taught us that God approved it [slavery], that it was a holy thing, and that the doubter need only look in the Bible if he wished to settle his mind" (Neider, *Autobiography*, 8). Witnessing the 1845 death of Samuel Smarr, shot on the streets in Hannibal, Missouri, Twain wrote of "the grotesque closing picture—the great family Bible spread open on the profane old man's breast by some thoughtful idiot. . . . In all the throng of gaping and sympathetic onlookers there was not one with common sense enough to perceive that an anvil would have been in better taste there than the Bible, less open to sarcastic criticism and swifter in its atrocious work" (Neider, *Autobiography*, 44). Twain would use virtually the same words in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to depict Colonel Sherburn shooting the blowhard drunkard Boggs, though Finn does not experience the horrible memories Twain himself endured: "In my nightmares I gasped and struggled for breath under the crush of that vast book for many a night" (Neider, *Autobiography*, 44).

Though the accounts of the various versions of the *Autobiography* can be somewhat discounted—they are more often than not the recollections of an unhappy older man—the major events that permanently marked Twain, left him embittered, and provided the impetus for some of his later and posthumously published writings are not in doubt and can be readily presented. First, while still a young man, Clemens became involved in printing, first as an apprentice, then as a journeyman. His career as a printer officially concluded in 1856, after which he served as an apprentice pilot on the Mississippi, ultimately becoming a full pilot in 1861. He went west, in February 1863, to Virginia City, Nevada, adopting the "Mark Twain" pseudonym for his journalism. His lively travel accounts and his fiction, as well as his lectures and capacity for self-promotion, made him world famous. Nevertheless, for all that his life and activities were full and varied, Twain never lost interest in printshops and the technology surrounding printing. His was not the interest of a dilettante but the concern of a would-be inventor who hoped to make money through the invention of a device that provided a right-justified line. An enormous amount of his time, energies, and earnings were spent promoting the typesetter invented by James W. Paige; his *Notebooks* are full of business schemes, proposals, and plans. However, Ottmar Mergenthaler's similar invention—the linotype—being the superior product, Twain was in the position

of the man who backed the second-place horse: He lost hugely despite his product's arguably being superior. (Some investments were also stolen by a dishonest employee.) No man likes to be proven wrong, particularly when the proofs are accompanied by dramatic financial losses, and Twain had to write frantically and commercially and to travel to give money-raising lectures when he would have preferred to rest and remain with his family.

It is likely that Twain could have coped with his economic losses with greater equanimity had he a happy domestic situation to sustain him, but this did not occur. He came from a reasonably large family, and following the death of his father, he had in 1858 seen his youngest brother Henry, to whom he was particularly close, die slowly from injuries incurred when the boilers on the steamboat *Pennsylvania* exploded. (This death is recorded in the Neider *Autobiography* as having been preceded by a remarkably realistic and prescient dream in which Henry's body, clad in Twain's clothing, lay in a casket in Memphis, an elderly lady putting flowers on its breast.) Additional deaths were to follow. He married Olivia Louise ("Livy") Langdon in 1870, and their first child and only son, Langdon, lived only eighteen months, dying in 1872; the boy was prematurely born and sickly, but as he became ill after an outing with his father, Twain ever after blamed himself for his son's death. Nor did two of Twain's three daughters outlive him: Olivia Susan ("Susy") Clemens, Twain's favorite daughter, lived only from 1872 to 1896, dying of spinal meningitis when Twain was on a fund-raising lecture tour; her younger sister, Jane Lampton ("Jean") Clemens, lived from 1880 to 1909. (The third sister, Clara Clemens, outlived everybody, dying in 1962.) His honest but ne'er-do-well older brother, Orion, died in 1897, having been supported by Twain for years. Finally, Twain's long-suffering and loving Livy died in 1904. These deaths left Twain desperately grasping for love and happiness and attempting to re-create the family he no longer possessed; in the spirit of a would-be paterfamilias he befriended a variety of little girls, calling them his "Angel Fish," creating for them an organization called the Aquarium Club, and writing them copious upbeat and optimistic letters. He also reacted not by publicly renouncing his ostensible faith and lecturing against religion but by writing, creating the doubting works that, when they were published posthumously, did much to change the ways in which later critics viewed him.

Poking fun at religious fundamentalists, particularly the hypocrisies that came from their unquestioning acceptance of the Bible, had long been one of Twain's favorite occupations, and even such early and popularly accepted writings as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884–1885) contain numerous scenes showing fundamentalist shortcomings and religious hypocrisies. The depiction of Sawyer's Aunt Polly, while ultimately affectionate, nevertheless manages to show a woman who misquotes the Scriptures in which she places blind belief, while the depiction of Sunday school is of a dismal place, the children bartering the pointless rewards earned for the unthinking memorization of the Bible for such useful

and desirable goods as a “piece of lickrish and a fish-hook” (*Mississippi Writings*, 31); the presiding superintendent, Mr. Walters, is a pedantic, long-winded bore, as is the minister. The depictions and assessments of religion in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are darker and more pointed, but then it is a novel for adults, depicting the ethical and racial awakening of the son of the racist town drunk. In the course of a journey down the Mississippi River, Huckleberry Finn is exposed to a great many of the events depicted in Twain’s autobiography—particularly slavery justified via Christianity—and must decide whether or not to return the runaway slave Jim to his owner. He agonizes over this decision, even writing a note to Jim’s erstwhile owner; its composition is expressed in what are essentially theological terms, and it leaves Huck feeling “good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life” (*Mississippi Writings*, 834). Then, realizing that adhering to the tenets of Christianity would have him betray his friend and a fellow human, Huck makes a decision about the note that is still electrifying: “‘All right, then, I’ll go to hell’—and tore it up” (*Mississippi Writings*, 835). The explicit rejection of contemporary Christianity and its hypocritical mores allows Huck to behave ethically and honorably, an unconcealed subtext that, as much as the characters’ frequent use of the word *nigger*, has ensured that the novel will continue to remain controversial.

One of the delights in researching Mark Twain comes from discovering how highly his contemporaries thought of him and how often they tended to agree with his views on religion. Andrew Lang, for example, stated publicly that “like other people, he [Twain] has his limitations. Even Mr. Gladstone, for instance, does not shine as a Biblical critic, nor Mark Twain as a critic of Italian art nor as a guide to the Holy Land” (45). The conclusion is obvious: Whatever his limitations may have been, Twain shone as a biblical critic.

Despite their mocking and questioning Christian beliefs, the content of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are readily defensible on artistic grounds and also on the grounds of historical form: The former is a humorous juvenile story; the latter, a bildungsroman. The majority of the late and posthumously published works are of a very different sort. A full listing and discussion of these is not possible here, for there are many, some little more than bitter sketches, splenetic drafts that Twain might well have discarded had the opportunity arisen. Nevertheless, as stated earlier, Twain never seems to have rejected the concept of a supernatural (theistic) creative force, merely the simplistic and hypocritical tub-thumping and Bible waving of contemporary fundamentalists and the pious idiocies, petty dishonesties, and ultimate cruelties of Mary Baker Eddy’s newly conceived Christian Science.

The “Extracts from Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven” (conceived in 1868 but not published until 1909), “A Singular Episode: The Reception of Rev. Sam Jones in Heaven” from 1891–1892), and the various “diary” stories (“Extract from Methuselah’s Diary” from the late 1870s, “Extracts from Adam’s Diary” from 1893, “Eve’s Diary” from 1905, and “Shem’s Diary,” conceived in the 1870s and reconceived in 1908–09]) explicitly satirize the fundamentalist attitudes then prevalent. The first mentioned is much the most significant of these, the narrative of Captain Eli Stormfield—dead about thirty years as the story starts—as he arrives in heaven via the wrong entrance, having chosen to race a comet. Stormfield rapidly discovers that Earth is nothing special; indeed, it is virtually unknown to the head clerk, and Stormfield’s saying that “it’s the one the Saviour saved” elicits the gentle response that “the worlds He has saved are like to the gates of heaven in number—none can count them. What astronomical system is your world in?” (*Collected Tales*, 832). After a bit, the recording angels locate Earth: “It is on the map. It is called the Wart” (833). The story continues in a similar vein, with Stormfield next requesting “my harp, and my wreath, and my halo, and my hymn-book, and my palm branch—I lack everything that a body naturally requires up here, my friend” (834). Naturally, the angel has never heard of these traditional accoutrements of Christianity, although he is able to procure them for Stormfield. In fairly rapid order, Stormfield discovers how useless and pointless they are and, in the company of others who have made similar discoveries, drops them beside the road—in a statement with perhaps intentional scatological overtones, he states that “they all dumped their loads, too”—and meets with a friend, Sam Bartlett, learning that heaven is “just the busiest place you ever heard of. . . . Singing hymns and waving palm branches through all eternity is pretty when you hear about it in the pulpit, but it’s as poor a way to put in valuable time as a body could contrive” (838). Little point is served by recounting in further detail Stormfield’s additional discoveries about the “real” afterlife, as opposed to that afterlife promoted and espoused by Christian fundamentalists. Suffice it to say that he discovers that people can be any age they wish; that the angels reject their traditional winged depictions; that heaven is not and cannot be a democracy; and that heaven is infinite, holds all, and has a membership not limited to white people. All of Twain’s satirical points are logically considered and remain valid, as fundamentalist beliefs have ossified rather than evolved, but for all that Captain Stormfield’s account is amusing, its satire is directed at the most obvious targets. This is also the case in “A Singular Episode,” in which the dreaming Twain finds himself on a train heading either to Jerusalem or Sheol; he substitutes passes with a sleeping passenger and thus has the opportunity to witness the discomfiture of the Archbishop of Canterbury, mistaken for Twain, when he is denied entrance to heaven, being told “professional humorists are not allowed here” (*Bible According to Mark Twain*, 199). The Reverend Sam Jones, an offensive and energetically proselytizing Texas fundamentalist, is permitted to enter heaven, as is the falsely identified Twain,

but Jones's behavior is so annoying that he drives everybody out: "When the gates closed, Saturday night, the Texan had the place all to himself" (202). Twain used neither the "Extracts from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven" nor "A Singular Episode" to deny the existence of an afterlife or a heavenly presence; he merely ridiculed the priorities of the Christian fundamentalist beliefs, creating and demolishing an ideological straw man.

The titles of the "diary" stories indicate their contents, though the diaries of Adam and Methuselah are not as significant as that of Eve. Eve (reused in "Eve Speaks" in the early 1900s and in "Eve's Autobiography" in 1905–1906) is intelligent, though appropriately innocent. Her diary recounts meeting the semibestial Adam and "training" him to accompany her, teaching him that they are a couple—"He seemed pleased to have me around, and I used the sociable 'we' a good deal, because it seemed to flatter him to be included" (*Collected Tales*, 698)—as well as offering some comic assessments of sex roles. Adam, for example, believes that the dodo is a wildcat, but Eve states, "I saved him. And I was careful not to do it in a way that could hurt his pride" (699). (These events are recounted from Adam's perspective in his diary, as is his gradual realization that the "kangaroo" Eve has "caught" is, in fact, a human child: Cain.) Nevertheless, the fantastic elements and satirical commentaries that enliven "Extracts from Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven" are absent from "Eve's Diary," which is straightforward and occasionally silly and indulges in no theological speculations. This is not the case in "Eve Speaks." The opening—"They drove us from the Garden with the swords of flame, the fierce cherubim. And what had we done? We meant no harm. We were ignorant, and did as any other children might do. We could not know it was wrong to disobey the commands, for the words were strange to us and we did not understand them" (*Collected Tales*, 710)—establishes the embittered tone. The rest of the story depicts the sorry nature of life outside the Garden, particularly the bitter nature of their education—"We know hunger, thirst, and cold; we know pain, disease, and grief; we know hate, rebellion, and deceit; we know remorse, the conscience that prosecutes guilt and innocence alike, making no distinction; we know weariness of body and spirit, the unrefreshing sleep, the rest which rests not, the dreams which restore Eden, and banish it again with the waking" (710)—and describes the discovery of Abel's bloody body. Eve gradually realizes that Abel does not sleep but is dead, a word she does not quite comprehend. The story concludes with an appropriately ironic note from Satan's diary: "Death has entered the world, the creatures are perishing; one of The Family is fallen; the product of the Moral Sense is complete. The Family think ill of death—they will change their minds" (712). A more cynical and embittered narrative would be difficult to find, but at the same time it is an unquestioning, euhemeristic rehashing of a biblical episode.

Also written in 1905, though not published until 1967, was "Three Thousand Years among the Microbes." Narrated by a microbe, B.b.Bkshp., also

known as “Huck,” who is aboard the “wonderfully ragged, incredibly dirty . . . malicious, malignant, vengeful, treacherous” tramp Blitzoski (*Which Was the Dream?* 436), it is a mishmash of humorous, satirical, and cranky observations about humanity, science, nature, and, of course, religion. “Heaven was not made for man alone, and oblivion and neglect reserved for the rest of his creatures,” states B.b.Bkshp. “He gave them life, He gave them humble services to perform, they have performed them, and they will not be forgotten, they will have their reward” (447). Though B.b.Bkshp speculates about cosmological and theological problems, making sport of the creed espoused by Mary Baker Eddy and arguing that “no creature designed, created, and appointed to a duty in the earth will be barred out of that happy home” (497), “Three Thousand Years among the Microbes” is perhaps best seen as a work asking questions of relativistic intent: Who are humans to believe that they alone are worthy and that theirs is the only religion? Is not the lowliest of animals deserving of the divine mercy of an afterlife in heaven? Although these questions are not unreasonable, the work that presents them is flaccid and disorganized, and like rather too many of the works currently bearing Twain’s name, it probably would not have seen publication were the author not so noted a literary figure.

Though incomplete, *Letters from Earth*, which was written in 1909 and first published in 1962, offers the same dismissive attitudes. Where it differs is in its framing device: The Creator explains that “man is an experiment, the other animals are another experiment. Time will show whether they were worth the trouble” (*Collected Tales*, 883). Archangel Satan journeys to assess the success of the experiment, his letters to fellow archangels Gabriel and Michael providing satiric accounts of religion, specifically humans’ mistaken attitudes and beliefs concerning the Creator, heaven, and Satan himself. Even though they tread familiar ground, the *Letters from Earth* offer an interesting combination of misanthropic cynicism and determined silliness. Both occur in the recounting of Noah’s discovery that a fly was left behind during the boarding of the Ark: “The return-voyage turned out to be long and difficult . . . but after sixteen days of earnest and faithful seeking, the fly was found at last, and received on board with hymns of praise and gratitude. . . . It was weary and worn, and had suffered somewhat from the weather, but was otherwise in good estate” (901). Nevertheless, this “good estate” has been maintained by the fly’s feasting on the corpses of “men and their families [who] had died of hunger on the barren mountain tops.” As Satan ironically states, “Thus was the sacred bird providentially preserved” (901). The *Letters* also contain a variety of Twain’s frank and unabashed scatology, as in the lively account of the worship of the microbes aboard the Ark: For them “the large intestine was in effect their heaven” (906), and their principal hymn is a paean to constipation. Though this in some ways a continuation of the ideas first introduced in “Three Thousand Years among the Microbes,” it is also at its core a significant

argument against the fundamentalist belief that theirs are the only existence and religion that matter.

The works written from 1897 to 1908, known variously as “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” “Schoolhouse Hill,” and “No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger,” were unpublished during Twain’s lifetime and first appeared in print in 1916 as *The Mysterious Stranger*, the three differing texts reconciled and combined by editors Albert Bigelow Paine and Frederick A. Duneka. It is one of Twain’s more intriguing works, set in the Austrian town of Eseldorf in 1490. Eseldorf—the name translates as “Assville”—is described by young apprentice printer August Feldner, and though his narrative opens with praise of the place and the established religious figures, what he praises is not attractive: a bridge built by the Devil provides access to the town, but the Devil was cheated of his wages by the Prior and the Monks. The present representative of the latter is Father Adolf, who is no better than his predecessors. After a suicide, “he was active. He was on hand to see that the government did its duty and turned the family out into the road, and confiscated its small belongings and didn’t smouch any of the Church’s share” (*No. 44*, 7).

“There is no evidence that there is to be a Heaven hereafter. If we should find, somewhere, an ancient book in which a dozen unknown men professed to tell all about a blooming and beautiful tropical paradise secreted in an inaccessible valley in the center of the eternal icebergs which constitute the Antarctic continent—not claiming that they had seen it themselves, but had acquired an intimate knowledge of it through a revelation from God—no Geographical Society in the earth would take any stock in that book; yet that book would be quite as authentic, quite as trustworthy, quite as valuable evidence as is the Bible. The Bible is just like it. Its Heaven exists solely upon hearsay evidence—evidence furnished by unknown persons; persons who did not prove that they had ever been there.”

—Mark Twain, “Reflections on Religion” (1906),
The Outrageous Mark Twain, 48.

Into Eseldorf comes the Mysterious Stranger, a handsome lad who goes by the name of “Number 44, New Series 864,962,” though his name is later given as Philip Traum (i.e., Philip Dream). Apparently preternaturally innocent and good, he befriends Feldner—they share a kind of telepathic bond—and is roundly abused by the other printers, though their viciousness inevitably backfires. Nevertheless, the story is only partially about Number 44/Traum; it is in part about Feldner’s awakening, maturation, and love; in part about the rewarding of an unjustly accused and honest priest; in part a lovingly detailed

description of the operations of a small printing shop; and in part a mishmash into which Twain incorporated a variety of semifantastic elements (invisibility, dreams, sleepwalking) and numerous deliberate anachronisms, including a letter from Mary Baker Eddy. Although individual elements and sections are often enjoyable, the work—in whatever form it is read—is negligible as either a statement of belief or an expression of disbelief.

Even with the six very late stories (composed in 1908–1909) that comprise the “Little Bessie” series, Twain never embraced atheism or espoused total disbelief, though in these stories his loathing of Christian fundamentalists is unconcealed. Little Bessie’s questions and statements not only reveal the simple and blinkered pieties of her mother but also serve to condemn these views. Bessie says, “God made man, without man’s consent, and made his nature, too, made it vicious instead of angelic, and then said, Be angelic, or I will punish you and destroy you. But no matter, God is responsible for everything man does all the same; He can’t get around that fact. There is only one Criminal, and it is not man” (*Fables of Man*, 38). It is unfortunate that although these stories explicitly express Twain’s religious attitudes, they are otherwise negligible as fiction.

It is also to be regretted that in all his works, Twain never conceived of religion in anything other than Christian terms. He occasionally wrote about Jews as characters, he had traveled through the Middle East and knew of Islam, and he knew of other Eastern religions, but for him, these faith-based creeds were not to be questioned, studied, or derided. He never recognized that they were not monoliths but were as fragmented and divisive as his Christianity. This blind acceptance of other faiths and blanket condemnation of his own is not uncommon—for too many people, “religion” equates with “Christianity”—but it shows a significant weakness in Twain’s thought. It is one thing to read deeply, study widely, and offer scholarly conclusions about religious faith in general; it is quite another to remain ignorant of the majority of the world’s beliefs while focusing on the most limited and derisive aspects of the faith in which one was raised.

It is also to be regretted that Twain never openly espoused most of his anti-Christian views, venting most of his spleen on creating works that he knew would not appear during his lifetime. It is also somewhat puzzling, for there is little doubt that he would have had a large and probably not unsympathetic audience. The audiences of the late nineteenth century had flocked to hear Robert G. Ingersoll denounce organized Christianity and to debate the necessity of religion, and there is no doubt that Twain knew of and approved Ingersoll’s actions. Indeed, after Ingersoll’s unexpected death, Twain’s condolence letter to Ingersoll’s niece stated that “except for my daughter’s I have not grieved for any death as I have grieved for his” (Ingersoll, 502). One can nevertheless speculate about Twain’s seeming reticence.

First, for all that Ingersoll prospered as a freethinker, he was exceptional, and he had extensive political connections that served to protect and insulate him. The case of De Robigne Mortimer Bennett, editor and publisher (as D. M. Bennett) of the freethinking newspaper *The Truth Seeker*, would have

been known to Twain: Bennett was persecuted, prosecuted, convicted, and jailed for the publication of obscenity by Anthony Comstock, then head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice; Bennett died a ruined man (Bradford, *D. M. Bennett*). Twain may have suspected that while he would prevail in a battle against Comstock, it would at best be a pyrrhic victory; his surviving family would be exposed to and probably devastated by the notoriety. In any case, he could not have personally afforded lengthy and expensive lawsuits.

More prosaically, Twain may not have wished to risk losing his audience. Middle Americans accepted him as a humorist and a novelist, but asking them to accept and support him as an anti-Christian may have seemed unduly risky. He was, after all, dependent upon their continued goodwill for his living. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* contains what is probably a reasonable description of the reception awaiting offensive stage performers: "I smelt sickly eggs by the barrel, and rotten cabbages, and such things; and if I know the signs of a dead cat being around, and I bet I do, there was sixty-four of them went in" (*Mississippi Writings*, 774). There is no reason to assume that Twain had any desire to be a target, metaphoric or otherwise, and even if criticisms were not literally hurled at him, Twain was sensitive—indeed, hypersensitive—to all criticism, brooding for years on slights, imagined and otherwise (Clemens, *My Father, Mark Twain*, 69–70; Lorch).

Finally, although he was articulate and had deservedly earned a reputation as a first-rate lecturer, Twain may have at some level feared to debate an equally articulate believer, sensing that his intellectual arguments against the existence of a benign deity would not suffice against his opponent's emotionally reassuring, albeit groundless, claims. It is one thing to mock the idiocies of fundamentalists or the cruelties of Christian Science; it is quite another to debate a trained theologian, somebody who would doubtless undermine Twain's satirical arguments by observing that neither fundamentalists nor Christian Scientists nor pompous self-serving clerics exemplify true Christianity.

Whatever the reasons for Twain's general reticence, it is to his credit that he did not dissemble. He may not have lectured, but he gave interviews discussing his beliefs, and also to his credit, he did not discard or censor his doubting notes and sketches but left them for posterity to assess. These posthumously available writings raise questions about Christianity that are still reasonable, and their depictions and assessments of the flaws of Christianity remain valid. A contemporary doubter looking for the beginnings of a path to atheism could do far worse than start with Mark Twain.

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Gore Vidal

S. T. Joshi

It is curious that Gore Vidal's most forthright essay on religion, "Monotheism and Its Discontents," appeared as late as 1992, for his expression of sentiments hostile to religion in general, and the Christian religion in particular, had made him notorious almost since the beginning of his career in the late 1940s. Vidal, who until recently alternated between residences in Italy and in Los Angeles, has become not only one of America's leading novelists and essayists, but an outspoken critic on a wide variety of controversial topics, including sexual liberation, homosexuality, political chicanery, and religion. Vidal has used a multiplicity of media—novels, essays, plays, political polemics, and interviews on film, television, and radio—to broadcast his views. Since the 1960s he has himself been a media celebrity, his aristocratic features and rapier-sharp wit being instantly recognizable. And in contrast to those of all the other thinkers covered in this volume, the most penetrating and distinctive of Vidal's criticisms of religion occur not in treatises but in an array of novels extending over a forty-year span.

EARLY LIFE AND CAREER

Born to a socially and politically well-connected family in 1925, Vidal spent his childhood and adolescence in an atmosphere of privilege, where it was expected that he would excel. His grandfather was the celebrated blind senator from Oklahoma, Thomas P. Gore, who was himself an atheist but who, for political reasons, took care to mask the fact, sporadically attending a Methodist church. Vidal, who was particularly close to his grandfather, would later speak of him and of his family:

They saw the worst of religion in the Bible Belt. And he never let on that he was not with them. My mother would complain as a child that she couldn't read the funny papers on Sunday. A lot of things were forbidden on the sabbath. They were trying to conform for fear that the neighbors would find out if they didn't. A lot of snooping going on. If you were doing the forbidden things on the sabbath, you were in trouble in Oklahoma. I think there were only two or three times when I went with him to church. (quoted in Kaplan, 45)

Since Vidal's own father, Gene Vidal (a minor figure in the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration), was also an apparent atheist, Vidal seems to have received no religious training in his youth. He attended St. Albans Academy and Phillips Exeter Academy but then passed up the opportunity to attend college and entered the army. Vidal was already at this time thinking that he might wish to enter politics, and he felt that a military career would foster his chances.

It was during his three years in the army (1943–1946) that Vidal became a writer. His first novel, *Williwaw*, based on his army experiences, was published in 1947, before he had turned twenty-two, and several other novels written in the following years established him as a vibrant new voice in post-war American literature. One of his novels, *The City and the Pillar* (1948), was not only a best seller but engendered intense controversy by its frank and sensitive depiction of a homosexual relationship between two young men.

It was, however, a slightly later novel, *Messiah*, that constituted Vidal's first foray into the criticism of religion. The first-person narrative of Eugene Luther (an obvious play on Vidal's own full name: Eugene Luther Gore Vidal, Jr.), *Messiah* tells of the emergence in California of a charismatic preacher, John Cave. Luther makes no secret of his own skepticism, telling a friend, Iris Mortimer:

I must warn you, Iris, that I'm not a believer. And though I'm sure that the revelations of other men must be a source of infinite satisfaction to them, individually, I shouldn't for one second be so presumptuous as to make a choice among the many thousands of recorded revelations of truth, accepting one at the expense of all the others: I might so easily choose wrong and get into eternal trouble. And you must admit that the selection is wide, and dangerous to the amateur. (62–63)

Cave himself began his career as nothing but an undertaker's assistant (66)—but this occupation is central to his message, which is simple and devastating: “It is good to die” (72).

Luther, shaken by his witnessing of Cave and his message, warns of its dangers: “If this thing spreads it will become organized. If it becomes organized, secondary considerations will obscure the point. The truth is no truer because only a few have experienced it” (81). But Iris counters that “a society which knows what we know, which believes in Cave and what he says, will be a pleasanter place in which to live, less anxious, more tolerant” (81).

Iris's prediction is soon put to the test. Paul Himmell, "the most successful young publicist in Hollywood" (85), is hired to make Cave and Cavesword (a term coined to denote Cave's religious message) a national phenomenon—and he does just that. Using all the slick tools of media publicity, Paul makes Cave a household name. Iris has come to believe that Cave is, in fact, the Antichrist—but she does not interpret this term in the usual fashion: "He's come to undo all the wickedness of the Christians" (116). Cave himself, who throughout the novel is deliberately portrayed as a bland, inscrutable, and perhaps psychologically empty figure, is aware that his preaching will entail a coming battle against organized religion, but he brushes it off: "'It never occurred to me that people who like to think of themselves as Christians couldn't accept both me and Christ at the same time. I know I don't promise the kingdom of heaven but I *do* promise oblivion and the loss of self, of pain'" (116).

But the ensuing religious conflict does materialize, especially after Cave says on television that churches are unnecessary and that they derive their power from superstition. Violence breaks out, leading to the destruction of St. Peter's in Rome (172). It would seem that in the course of time, the entire world has been converted to Cavism. Presently, we hear of people committing suicide as a result of Cave's preaching; as Paul tells Luther:

We're doing good. The people are losing their fear of death. Last month there were twelve hundred suicides in this country directly attributable to Cavesword. And these people didn't kill themselves just because they were unhappy, they killed themselves because he had made it easy, even desirable. Now you know there's never been anybody like that before in history, anywhere. (206–207)

It therefore comes as no surprise that Cave wishes to set up euthanasia chambers at every "Center" (the equivalent of churches in the Cavite religion). When Luther, who has become increasingly disenchanted with Cave, dares Cave to commit suicide himself as an example to others, Cave maintains that he will do so ("I'm not afraid," 222); but in fact, he is later killed by Paul, who has wished him out of the way (as Luther remarks, "Paul wants full control of the establishment," 225). Paul is later forced out and then kills himself. At the end of the novel Luther realizes that it is he, and not Cave, who is the real messiah.

Messiah is an extraordinarily rich and searing religious satire. The parallels between Paul Himmell and St. Paul, the true spreader of the Christian doctrine, are patent and deliberate. Vidal is therefore likening St. Paul to a Madison Avenue con artist who spread the word for purely self-serving reasons. And in emphasizing Cave's message of death, Vidal is apparently subscribing to Nietzsche's contention that Christianity itself is a religion that looks toward death, repudiating the boons of life for the false paradise of heaven. In *Messiah*, Vidal also wrote a remarkably prescient fable about the rapidity with which religious fanaticism can overtake a nation and a world that consists of

largely uneducated and easily indoctrinated individuals. His prophecy would, in a sense, come true a quarter century later with the rise of the religious right.

VIDAL AS HISTORICAL NOVELIST

After publishing *Messiah*, Vidal took a decade-long holiday from novel writing: He came to believe that the notoriety of *The City and the Pillar* had prejudiced publishers against him. Between 1950 and 1954 he published five pseudonymous novels (including three lively detective stories under the pen name “Edgar Box”), but thereafter he pursued a career in writing for television, film, and theater. He achieved tremendous popular and critical success with two Broadway plays, *Visit to a Small Planet* in 1957 and *The Best Man* in 1960, and also became a frequent guest on television game shows and news broadcasts. Accordingly, when he returned to novel writing with *Julian* in 1964, his own celebrity helped to propel that novel to best-seller status.

The subject of *Julian*, the first of the works that would make Vidal perhaps the most distinguished American historical novelist of his time, was deliberately chosen. In presenting a sympathetic account of the Roman emperor Julian, who, during his brief reign (361–363 CE), attempted to stop the spread of Christianity and reinstitute Greco-Roman paganism, Vidal was signaling his own hostility to the dominance of Christianity in the West. In a prefatory chapter of the novel, Libanius, hearing of Emperor Theodosius’ decree demanding obedience to the Nicene Creed, hopes to fight “pernicious Christian doctrine” (4) by publishing Julian’s fragmentary memoir. The bulk of the novel presents that memoir. Julian reports that he was raised as a Christian (Christianity had become dominant in the Roman Empire following the Emperor Constantine’s conversion in 324 CE) but had become intrigued by the attacks on Christianity by such pagan thinkers as Plotinus and Porphyry. His skepticism grew under the pungent criticism of his teacher Maximus, who pointed out the numerous Christian borrowings from other religions:

“Vidal was never shy in uttering his opinions on religion or other subjects. In 1974, Vidal delivered a lecture at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, the Catholic Church’s foremost institution of higher learning, in which he flatly stated, ‘I don’t believe in god.’ The lecture was delivered at a seminar before a small group of students for the priesthood. The Reverend John Navone, a maverick Jesuit intellectual, called Vidal ‘the contemporary Voltaire.’”

—Krebs

The Christians wish to replace our beautiful [pagan] legends with the police record of a reforming Jewish rabbi. Out of this unlikely material they hope to

make a final synthesis of all the religions ever known. They now appropriate our feast days. They transform local deities into saints. They borrow from our mystery rites, particularly those of Mithras. The priests of Mithras are called 'fathers.' So the Christians call *their* priests 'fathers.' They even imitate the tonsure, hoping to impress new converts with the familiar trappings of an older cult. Now they have started to call the Nazarene 'savior' and 'healer.' Why? Because one of the most beloved of our gods is Asklepios, whom we call 'savior' and 'healer.' (86)

Priscus—who, with Libanius, interrupts Julian's narrative at various points to provide his own commentary—writes engagingly of Julian's battles with the early Christian pope Gregory, remarking, "The malice of a true Christian attempting to destroy an opponent is something unique in the world. No other religion ever considered it necessary to destroy others because they did not share the same beliefs. At worst, another man's belief might inspire amusement or contempt. . . . No evil ever entered the world quite so vividly or on such a vast scale as Christianity did" (142). Julian, for his part, maintains that he is attempting not actually to suppress Christianity, but merely to restore the old gods of paganism; he remarks wryly at one point, "At the rate they [the Christians] kill one another, it would be gratuitous for me to intervene" (283).

What Julian actually did, in 362, was to declare religious freedom, thereby overthrowing Christianity as the state religion. In the novel, it is at this point that Julian subjects Christian doctrine to a searching analysis: "They base *their* religion on the idea of a single god, as though that were a novelty: from Homer to Julian, Hellenes have been monotheist. Now this single god, according to the largest of the Galilean sects, sent his son (conceived of a virgin, like so many other Asiatic gods) to preach to the world, to suffer, to rise from the dead, to judge mankind on a day which was supposed to have dawned more than three hundred years ago" (331). The reference is to Jesus' obviously false prediction, recorded in all three of the Synoptic Gospels, that his second coming would occur within the lifetime of those who heard his preaching. As for Jesus himself:

We must never forget that *in his own words*, Jesus was a Jew who believed in the Law of Moses. This means he could not be the son of God (the purest sort of blasphemy), much less God himself, temporarily earthbound. There is nothing in the book of the Jews which prepares us for a messiah's kinship with Jehovah. Only by continual reinterpretation and convenient "revelations" have the Galileans been able to change this reformer-rabbi's career into a parody of one of our own gods, creating a passion of death and rebirth quite inconceivable to one who kept the Law of Moses. (332)

As for St. Paul, he "outdid all the quacks and cheats that ever existed anywhere" (332).

Julian's actions now become more unrestrained. In Greece, Julian thinks that the spirit of Alexander the Great has occupied him, and he prepares for

an invasion of Persia. He orders the shrine of St. Babylas to be removed: The place is sacred to Apollo. When the temple of Apollo is burned, Julian blames the Christians. He seems to be becoming a fanatic; as Libanius remarks, "I felt Julian was overdoing it. . . . He wanted everything restored at once" (383). Julian later dies in battle, his quest to halt Christianity an obvious failure. Libanius comments:

I see nothing good ever coming of this religious system [Christianity] no matter how much it absorbs our ancient customs and puts to use for its own ends Hellenic wit and logic. Yet I have no doubt now that the Christians will prevail. Julian was our last hope, and he went too soon. Something large and harmful has come into the life of this old world. One recalls, stoically, the injunction of Sophocles: "And ever shall this law hold good, nothing that is vast enters into the life of mortals without a curse." (384–385)

Pricus adds, "Julian must be obliterated or at least made monster before the Christian Empire can properly be born" (405). The use of the term *Empire* is deliberate: Christianity is not merely a religion; it is a means of exercising political control over human beings.

The extraordinary historical richness of *Julian*—drawing upon Julian's actual writings as well as those of Libanius, Ammianus Marcellinus, and later historians such as Edward Gibbon, J. B. Bury, and many others—justifies its high rank among Vidal's novelistic output and among the historical novels of its era. Far from being merely a mechanical re-creation of a remote epoch, *Julian* delivers a forceful message regarding the sordid means by which Christianity became established as a world religion—by distorting Jesus' message, by blatant indoctrination, by ruthless suppression of religious rivals, and by utilizing all the powers of an immense imperial apparatus to enforce outward conformity among a populace that nonetheless remained largely pagan in its deepest emotional sympathies. Vidal provided amusement at Christianity's expense by recounting in detail the frequently absurd and remarkably vicious disputes over fine points of doctrine that engaged the attention of leading Christian thinkers of the period. As Louis Auchincloss wrote in a review, Vidal's "Christians are narrow-minded, disputatious, savage to their enemies and devoid of any style or eloquence" (19).

In 1968, four years after the publication of *Julian*, Vidal became a household word with the issuance of *Myra Breckinridge*, the notorious satirical novel about a man who has a sex-change operation and becomes a woman. This delightfully scabrous work is of interest in the present context only insofar as Vidal had long been of the opinion that Christianity—and Judaism—had been the spearheads of the puritanical disdain of sexual pleasure, especially of homosexual sex. In 1981, in the controversial essay "Pink Triangle and Yellow Star" (first published as "Some Jews and the Gays" in *The Nation* of November 14, 1981), Vidal boldly claimed that some Jewish leaders had

made a dangerous pact with evangelical Christians, leading some of them to become gay baiters. He singled out the right-wing Jewish commentator Norman Podhoretz and his wife, Midge Decter, although he also quoted Joseph Epstein as remarking, "If I had the power to do so, I would wish homosexuality off the face of the earth" (*United States*, 605). Vidal concluded, "Today, American evangelical Christians are busy trying to impose on the population at large their superstitions about sex and the sexes and the creation of the world" (*United States*, 597).

This essay evoked some furor at the time, but it was nothing compared to what a pair of later essays would produce. In "The Day the American Empire Ran Out of Gas" (appearing in *The Nation* of January 11, 1986, as "Requiem for the American Empire"), Vidal concluded that with the United States now a debtor nation, the American Empire was officially over. Podhoretz and Decter both wrote responses to this article, to which Vidal replied with "A Cheerful Response," which appeared as "The Empire Lovers Strike Back" in *The Nation* of March 22, 1986. Here he maintained that the Jewish lobby, in order to secure military and economic support for Israel, had "made common cause with every sort of reactionary and anti-Semitic group in the United States, from the corridors of the Pentagon to the TV studios of the evangelical Jesus Christers" (*United States*, 1020). This article provoked predictable accusations that Vidal was an anti-Semite, although some recent scholarship appears to confirm Vidal's stance. Podhoretz, in particular, wrote a lengthy article, "The Hate That Dare Not Speak Its Name," in which he axiomatically assumed that Vidal's attack on him was anti-Semitic, not merely anti-Zionist; he expressed dismay that many of the intellectuals he had consulted on the matter did not follow his reasoning.

These articles discuss Vidal's attitude toward religion only indirectly; but that cannot be said for *Creation*, an even more exhaustive treatment of the ancient world than *Julian*. Here we find ourselves several centuries before the birth of Christ, when the Persian ambassador to Greece, Cyrus Spitama, engages in an intellectual quest throughout the civilized world for philosophical truth. As he puts it simply at the outset, "For me there is only one subject worth pondering—creation" (10). Because the novel is set centuries before the origin of Christianity, we find none of the occasionally strident attacks on Christian doctrine that fill *Julian*. Instead, we see Cyrus canvassing the ancient world and its leading thinkers—Zoroaster (who is his grandfather), Pythagoras, Buddha, Confucius, and others—for their opinions as to the origin of the universe and other central questions of philosophy. The novel is narrated by the young Democritus (Cyrus's nephew), later to become the founder of the implicitly atheistic philosophy of atomism.

It would be fruitless to examine in detail the progression of this immense novel, or even the various arguments that the philosophers whom Cyrus meets expound in response to his questioning. It becomes plain that Cyrus's

"The original gentlemen's agreement between Church and State was that *We the People* (the State) will in no way help or hinder any religion while, absently, observing that as religion is 'a good thing,' the little church on Elm Street won't have to pay a property tax. . . . The *quo* for this huge *quid* was that religion would stay out of politics and not impose its superstitions on *Us the People*. The agreement broke down years ago."

—Gore Vidal, "The New Theocrats" (*Nation*, July 21, 1997);
The Last Empire, 423

(and Vidal's) sympathies lie chiefly with Buddhism and Confucianism. In meeting Buddha, Cyrus believes that his system is a "perfect atheism" (237). He is amazed at two particular aspects of Buddha's teachings:

Until I met the Buddhists, I did not think it possible for a religion or philosophy or world view of any complexity to exist without a theory of creation, no matter how imprecise. But here was a sect or order or religion which had captured the imagination of two powerful kings and many wise men, and the order had done so without ever taking seriously the only great question: How did the cosmos begin?

Worse, Buddhists regard all gods with the same sort of amiable contempt that educated Athenians do. But the Athenians are fearful of prosecution by public opinion, while the Buddhists are indifferent to the superstitions of the Brahmans. They do not even care enough about the gods to turn them into devils the way Zoroaster did. The Buddhists accept the world as it is, and try to eliminate it. (235)

As for Confucius, whom he meets on a trip to China, Cyrus also concludes flatly that "Confucius was an atheist" (401). He later elaborates the point:

I think that for all practical purposes, the Confucians are atheists. They do not believe in an afterlife or a day of judgment. They are not interested in how this world was created or for what purpose. Instead, they act as if this life is all there is and to conduct it properly is all that matters. For them, heaven is simply a word to describe correct behavior. Because the common people have all sorts of irrational feelings about heaven—a concept as old as the race—Confucius has cleverly used the idea of heaven in order to give a magical authority to his pronouncements on the way that men ought to treat one another. (418–419)

It was important to Vidal's purpose that Cyrus—who at the outset is a relatively orthodox Zoroastrian—acknowledge "my deep dislike of atheism" (419); he nevertheless says of Confucius that "I have never known a man with such a clear idea of how public and private affairs should be conducted. . . . If one is going to eliminate the creator of all things, then it is a good idea to

replace the creator with a very clear idea of what constitutes goodness in the human scale" (419). Vidal was also careful to conclude the novel with Democritus' resounding utterance, "Matter is all. All is matter" (488), thereby enshrining atheistic materialism as the final conclusion of this enormous novel of ideas.

It may be worth treating *Kalki* here. This slim but devastatingly cynical novel in some senses reprises the themes of *Messiah*. We are introduced to James J. Kelly, an American who claims that he is the Hindu messiah, Kalki. His followers hand out paper flowers and claim that the end of the world is coming. The narrator, the aviatrix Theodora Hecht Ottinger, is persuaded by Kelly to drop thousands of the paper flowers all across the world by airplane; they turn out to be poisoned and end up killing the entire human race, with the exception of a small band of Kelly's associates. Kelly's stated reasons for destroying humanity—overpopulation, pollution of the earth, and so on (81ff.)—are very largely Vidal's own, as stated in essays of the time. In the end, Kelly's plans for beginning a new, purer human race are confounded by the fact that none of his female associates are capable of bearing children.

Kalki is not explicitly antireligious in the manner of *Messiah*, but it raises many of the same issues as that novel, notably a neoreligious cult of death. As a satirical novel it is difficult to surpass: The revelation, halfway through the novel, that nearly the entire human race has been eliminated is one of the most powerful moments in contemporary literature. One gains the impression that Vidal took a certain misanthropic pleasure in wiping the earth clean. As he wrote in his memoir, *Palimpsest*, "My imagination is often triggered by the 'what if' that leads to the end of things" (173).

LATER WRITINGS

Vidal's most unrestrained attack on Christianity comes in the short satirical novel *Live from Golgotha*, which reprises another central theme of *Messiah*: the power of the media to control human thought. It was in this year that Vidal published his essay "Monotheism and Its Discontents" (*Nation*, July 13, 1992; *United States*, 1048–1054). The thrust of the essay is simple: "The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism." By this statement Vidal explicitly indicted not only Christianity but Judaism and Islam also, which he labeled the "sky-god religions." Strictly speaking, Vidal does not actually embrace atheism, and his remarks could theoretically be interpreted to suggest that he could envision polytheism as a viable religion, but the atheistic implications of this essay, as of the rest of his work, are unmistakable. Vidal stresses the unwarranted intrusion of religion into the secular sphere, in defiance of the First Amendment and the known views of the Founding Fathers. He maintains that monotheism has resulted only in a culture of hatred (of African-Americans, women, gays, and others), and he sees

the United States as increasingly polarized between the religious and the secular; indeed, he openly advocates “an all-out war on the monotheists” in the name of sanity and civilization.

Vidal's own contribution to that war is *Live from Golgotha*. It is difficult to describe the plot of this outrageous and frequently hilarious polemic, which shuttles back and forth in time between the present (and future) and the past of two thousand years ago. It is narrated by Timothy, who was born a few years after the death of Jesus. Learning from St. Paul that a strange sort of virus is erasing all copies of the Synoptic Gospels, Timothy realizes that he must write his own gospel of what actually happened to Jesus. Meanwhile, an executive at NBC has managed to go back in time, claiming that he wishes to film the Crucifixion. This self-parodic science-fictional premise allows Vidal all manner of jokes at the expense of Jesus, St. Paul, and Christianity in general. Jesus himself, we learn, was not the handsome and fresh-faced youth of countless cheap paintings; instead, “Jesus was enormously fat with this serious hormonal problem—the so-called parable about the loaves and fishes was just the fantasy of somebody who could never get enough to eat” (29). And there are passing whimsies, as in the offhand remark, “Like so many of life's born failures, he became a Christian” (78).

But the novel is far more than a series of abusive insults. Vidal, a thorough student of the Bible, pointed out many of the more troubling features of Scripture and Christian doctrine. James, the brother of Jesus, is careful to point out Jesus' Jewish origins and the essential Jewishness of his entire mission, saying that Jesus “was simply a devout Jew of the Reformed Temple Party” (110). In Ephesus, an old woman complains bitterly to Timothy about the most notorious failing of Jesus' prophesying, his failure to return to earth within the lifetime of those who had heard his preaching:

We have been waiting patiently—lo! these many years. . . . I and my friends who first brought me to Jesus, believed Him when He said that He—as the bona-fide Messiah—would return to us while we were still alive. Well, my friends have long since crossed the shining river and I am barely clinging to the flotsam and jetsam here by de ribberside. So could you kindly share with us His latest adjusted estimated time of arrival? (72)

St. Paul's retort—“There was, madam, no agreed-on timetable when Our Lord left us” (72)—is, as Vidal knows full well, an evasion, for Jesus' prophecy is unequivocal: “But I tell you of a truth, there shall be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:27; cf. Matt. 16:28, Mark 9:1). In this novel, Vidal also emphasized how St. Paul, for all practical purposes, took over Christianity and molded it to his desires, which were not necessarily the same as Jesus': “By now the whole thing was not only pretty much his invention but it was kept together by his energy and mastery of cross-filing. . . . James and the Jerusalem crowd were,

gradually, cut out of the action. No other way of putting it. They just faded away" (144).

But the most outrageous aspect of *Live from Golgotha* is its conclusion. Here Vidal asserted that Jesus managed to escape being crucified altogether, instead allowing Judas (also represented as grossly fat) to take his place on the cross. Jesus, in fact, has gone forward in time and become a militant Zionist ("He was and is a zealot. A fanatic. A revolutionary. A Zionist first, last and always," 192) who, in the year 2001, intends to set off a nuclear holocaust from Tel Aviv. A bit later, Timothy comes to an even more cataclysmic conclusion: "What was becoming clearer by the moment that day in Jerusalem was the true identity of the original Jesus—he was indeed Lucifer incarnate, who had been transformed by Saint [Paul]’s faith and genius in marketing into a three-part god, highly suitable for everyone on earth to worship" (214). But by going back in time, Timothy manages to persuade Pontius Pilate to crucify the actual Jesus instead of Judas.

The wickedly blasphemous humor of *Live from Golgotha* inspired its predictable recoil of outrage on the part of the pious, from Pat Robertson’s claim that Vidal was himself the Antichrist (see Cumming) to D. M. Thomas’s owl-ish criticism that Vidal’s satire is "excessive, a product of the author’s antireligious beliefs rather than a natural consequence of his artistic creation," and that the novel "might have been richer and more thought-provoking had it been written by someone less hostile to monotheistic religion." But the very purpose of Vidal’s novel is to deliver an antireligious polemic, and in that capacity it succeeds brilliantly. Even the Catholic Andrew Greeley admitted, "It may well be said that Vidal’s *jeu d’esprit* with blasphemy is witty, ingenious and frothy, with emphasis on the last adjective."

Gore Vidal, as one of the most articulate and forceful opponents of fundamentalist Christianity and of religion in general, has written a succession of novels that underscore his central concerns: the baneful effects of religion’s intrusion into the secular sphere, the power of the media to disseminate religious fundamentalism, the hatred and resentment that can so easily emerge from adherence to religious doctrine, and the way in which religion can hinder the social advancement of women, gays, and other minorities. Precisely because Vidal has chosen to express his views in novels rather than essays or treatises, his influence may well be more enduring than that of even the most accessible philosopher.

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Voltaire

Jean-Claude Pecker

Voltaire is certainly the most famous French writer of the eighteenth century, one of the few in the Western world who paved the way for modern society. He symbolizes the fight of the intelligentsia against blind powers, stupid prejudices, and intolerant religions. Perhaps he was less a pure philosopher than John Locke, Benedict de Spinoza, or Denis Diderot, perhaps less a scientist than Sir Isaac Newton, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, or Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier, perhaps less a politician than Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, or the Marquis de Condorcet; but he was all of those, and moreover, he was a magnificent writer, and his ironical style was as powerful as an entire army.

The name of Voltaire is frequently associated with his famous motto “Écrasons [or Écrasez] l’infâme!” (“[Let us] crush the infamy!”), from a letter to Jean Le Rond d’Alembert of November 28, 1762. Actually, Voltaire’s position with respect to religion, and to the concept of God, is more complex. It stems from a remarkable life story, from several painful experiences, and from his sensitivity to the denial of justice in his own country.

LIFE OF VOLTAIRE

François-Marie Arouet (not yet Voltaire) was born in Châtenay, a country suburb of Paris, on February 20, 1694. He was a very weak baby, and during his whole life he complained regularly of poor health. Still, his career became one of the longest in the history of literature. His father was a wealthy and prominent man. For this reason he felt obliged to adopt a pseudonym, “Voltaire,” an anagram of *Arouet l.j.*, or Arouet le jeune (Arouet junior), where *u* and *j* became *v* and *i*. Later, he was called Monsieur de Voltaire.

Being wealthy, Voltaire was free; he was never obliged to sacrifice his independence. Being free, he was often persecuted. Being persecuted, he used his wits in the strongest possible manner. And he produced a remarkable series of writings.

Voltaire was educated at the Jesuit College Louis-le-Grand for seven years. There he was considered a genius—precocious and therefore dangerous. One of his teachers predicted that he would become the “coryphaeus of deism.” When he left school, he decided to become a writer; his godfather, the abbot of Chateauneuf, became his preceptor. That priest was liberal and even skeptical; he had entered the church more by ambition than by conviction. He introduced Voltaire to Ninon de Lenclos, a rich socialite, then an old lady (1616–1705), and to the society of those who, during the last years of Louis XIV’s reign, were repulsed by the generalized hypocrisy. Voltaire was already living in an atmosphere of controversy.

Voltaire’s father, who wished his son to be a magistrate, worried about having a son who wrote poetry. The family’s atmosphere became heavy; after some incidents, the young Voltaire was obliged to go to Holland as a secretary to the French ambassador. There Voltaire fell in love with a daughter of Madame de Noyer, a French lady living in Holland. The scandal brought the young man back to France. But his father forbade him from entering the family home. The heartbroken young man for a time considered emigrating to America. A friend of Arouet senior, Louis de Caumartin, took the young man with him to his remote residence of Saint-Ange, where Voltaire developed a fascination with Henri IV (1553–1610). During this stay, the young man wrote his poem *La Henriade* and a study, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*. Louis XIV died in 1715; an indecent explosion of joy spread among the intelligentsia, so strong had been the despotism of the old king. Voltaire was twenty-one; very daringly, he wrote some satiric verses against the regent (Philippe d’Orléans, 1674–1723) and was forced to exile himself from Paris in 1716—first in Tulle, then in Sully, where he enjoyed the life of a country gentleman. Back in Paris the next year, he was again accused (perhaps falsely) of having written some satirical rhymes. In May 1717, he was imprisoned in the Bastille. That period (eleven months) had a determining influence on Voltaire. He realized bitterly the injustices of the world and the prejudices of a frozen society. It was in the Bastille that he decided to write under the name of Voltaire.

In prison he wrote a tragedy, *Oedipe*, and several pieces of poetry. The regent recognized his innocence and set him free in 1718. *Oedipe* was a success. Jealous of the genius of the young man, his enemies, including church figures, attacked him violently. From this period dates the verse: “Our priests are not what a futile mob thinks, our credulity is what makes all their knowledge” (*Oedipe* 4.1.57–58). Voltaire became the pet aversion of the regent’s enemies, who succeeded in exiling him from Paris for a time.

In 1722, Voltaire traveled to Holland; in Brussels he met Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). They did not speak the same language. A lifelong hatred was born; they published many violent lampoons of each other.

In the next period of his life Voltaire was a successful playwright: After *Oedipe* in 1722 came *Artémire* and *Mariamne* in 1724 and several others. *La Henriade*, an epic poem, was highly praised; it is based on the life of Henri IV, a king who fought the excesses of religious fanaticism. This poem displays Voltaire's open attitude in the face of the narrow-mindedness of French Catholics. In the fall of 1725, Voltaire was violently insulted, even assaulted, by the friends of the powerful Chevalier de Rohan. He started to retaliate. But the Cardinal de Fleury (1653–1743; then state minister under the young Louis XV) did not help Voltaire, who wrongly believed that Fleury was his protector. Once more, in 1726, he was imprisoned in the Bastille, this time for three months, and was forced to choose either to stay in prison or to leave Paris.

It appeared impossible to fight in France; Voltaire flew to England, a country where freedom of speech prevailed. He stayed there for three years and was a familiar of the court. Voltaire became acquainted with the best minds of the time. The contrast between the two countries excited him. In London he experienced a period of remarkable productivity. He spoke English fluently, and he became an admirer of constitutional monarchy. He also became interested in the sciences; Newton's *Principia Mathematica* was an influential book in English philosophical circles at a time when very few French scientists opposed the Cartesian tradition. Voltaire, stimulated by the dispute, became a devoted Newtonian. He began to write his biography of Charles XII of Sweden while continuing his theatrical work: *Brutus* is a plea for freedom of thought. Voltaire used his English period to make known in France the achievements of English arts and sciences. This period was the beginning of Voltaire's immense correspondence (more than twenty thousand pieces, covering the whole century).

Back in France in 1729, in spite of a hostile gentry, Voltaire led a comfortable life, surrounded by faithful friends. In 1733 he published (in English) his *Letters Concerning the English Nation* and, in 1734, the French version: *Lettres Philosophiques sur les Anglais*. The *Letters* were easy to read, written in fluent language. In them, Voltaire fought vigorously against the concept of "innate ideas"—a heretical opinion at the time. He maintained that it had not been proven that God was indeed able to give the power of thinking to a piece of matter, as taught by the Bible. Voltaire dared to criticize Blaise Pascal, and he was bitterly blamed as if he were criticizing religion itself. The church condemned the *Letters* as "scandalously contrary to religion, morals, and society." It became necessary to lie. The following poetical work, *L'Épître à Uranie*, was published under an assumed name. The persecution did not stop, however. Condorcet related a dialogue between a police officer and Voltaire:

POLICEMAN: Whatever you can write, you will never be able to destroy the Christian religion.

VOLTAIRE: We shall see about that. (32)

Voltaire could not stay in Paris. At the invitation of Madame du Châtelet, he moved to the Château de Cirey, in eastern Champagne, in 1734.

A few months before moving, Voltaire had begun a long-term relationship—full of passion, punctuated by disputes, deceptions, and reconciliations—with Émilie de Breteuil, Madame du Châtelet. She was a brilliant woman and an excellent scientist. Soon, they engaged in a sort of intimate collaboration, studying science and philosophy. They called themselves “Newtonians.” While Voltaire produced his *Éléments de la philosophie de Newton*, she translated Newton’s *Principia*, and both promoted Newton’s philosophy in France. Émilie du Châtelet and Voltaire played a decisive role in popularizing Newtonianism outside the closed circle of pure scientists.

Under Émilie du Châtelet’s influence, Voltaire continued his work in science. He (and she, independently) entered a contest of the Académie des Sciences for a prize involving the propagation of fire. The Swiss mathematician Leonard Euler got the prize; but their papers were favorably received. At Cirey, Voltaire wrote many works, including some tragedies. One of these tragedies, *Le Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le Prophète*, describes the prophet as an ambitious tyrant: The church was clever enough to see that the criticisms against Muhammad were actually directed at Catholic fanaticism. The book was burned. But Voltaire was such a clever letter writer that Pope Benedict XIV accepted the dedication of that tragedy, and the battle was finally won by Voltaire. Together with Émilie, Voltaire explored Leibniz’s works with passion. He was reluctant; she was enthusiastic. His criticism of Leibniz came later in his novel *Candide, ou l’optimisme*.

The popular Voltaire was no longer a criminal. He was by then recognized in the Western world as a major intellectual leader. In 1736, on the initiative of the learned king of Prussia Frederick II, a long correspondence started. Between 1740 and 1749, Voltaire traveled a great deal between Cirey, Brussels, and the court of Louis XV. This period was for Voltaire a sort of apex in his life. When Fleury died in 1746, Voltaire replaced him at the Académie Française. Not only did he pursue his fierce battle against fanaticism, but he also started to fight real cases of injustice.

The death of Émilie du Châtelet in 1749 was a blow. Cirey without Émilie was not Cirey. The desperate Voltaire spent some time in Paris and finally accepted Frederick II’s invitation, going to Prussia in 1751. But the king was temperamental, and Voltaire was irritable and restless. In 1753, Voltaire recognized he could not stay in Prussia much longer; he left the court and arrived back in France after a long and painful trip. After some time in Alsace, in January 1754 he bought property near Lake Geneva, which he called “Les Délices.” He was by then a very rich man and able to buy various pieces of property as a device to escape both French and Swiss intolerance. He entertained many important visitors at his home. But he once again had to fight on two sides, against Catholic injustice in France, and against Protestant censorship by the Geneva Calvinists.

At the end of 1758, Voltaire bought a still more important property on the French side of the border. Ferney became a sort of literary capital of Europe,

there Voltaire received friends from all over the continent. There he conducted his actions to rehabilitate Jean Calas, Pierre-Paul Sirven, Gérard de Lally-Tollendal, Jean-François de la Barre, and other persecuted individuals. There he wrote his best-known novels. His household was in the hands of Marie-Louise Denis, a widow and Voltaire's niece; she was entirely devoted to him and was his last mistress.

Voltaire led the quiet and peaceful life of a prolific writer. He did not travel, but he wrote much, including several tragedies (*L'Orphelin de la Chine*, about Genghis Khan, and *Tancrède*), his shocking poem *La Pucelle d'Orléans* in which Joan of Arc is described not as a saint, but as a woman with sexual desires, a sort of Amazon), and the poem *La Destruction de Lisbonne* (about the destruction of Lisbon by the earthquake of 1755), but mainly some of his more famous novels, notably *Candide* (1759), in which he opposed the optimistic philosophy of Leibniz. He contributed some entries to the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot and d'Alembert's humanist monument of the Enlightenment, which began publication in 1751. This was a new occasion for Voltaire to be vilified by his Parisian enemies, reluctant to accede to such a demolition of the old order. To quote Condorcet, "The oppressors of all kinds, who had long feared his writings, learned to dread his activity, his generosity, his courage." In his peaceful retirement, Voltaire continued his fight against prejudice and injustice. The "affaire Calas" was as important an event in France as was the later "Dreyfus affair," at the dawn of the twentieth century. Both produced tremendous shake-ups of political power. Other cases moved him—the cases of Sirven, of the general Lally-Tollendal, of the chevalier de la Barre—and again he fought the fanaticism of injustice, led by fundamentalist inspiration and linked with a monarchy claiming divine status. The bishop of Annecy, in Italian Savoie, of which Ferney was a dependency, became aggressive. To defuse his hostility, the astute Voltaire made a solemn communion at the church of Ferney, followed by a public recognition of his respect for the church. In this way he showed that he was for the church, a place of social stability and understanding, but not for the violence committed in its name or for its intolerance.

On the death of Louis XV (1710–1774), Turgot, a new minister of Louis XVI and a man of culture, was close to the philosophers of the *Encyclopedia*. Voltaire saw in this new power an omen of the victory of reason over superstition. In 1778, he decided to return to Paris; his tragedy *Irène* was onstage, and he returned in triumph. He stayed a few weeks in Paris and was brilliantly received as a "brother" by the Free Masonry at the lodge of the Seven Sisters (of which Benjamin Franklin was a member). But that triumphal sojourn was exhausting. He knew he would never see Ferney again. To his secretary, he declared, "I die adoring God, loving my friends, not hating my enemies, and detesting superstition" (note to his secretary, Jean-Louis Wagnière, February 28, 1778). He died on May 30, 1778, after having received confession and declared (according some witnesses) that he was dying "in the

Catholic religion where [he was born].” However, this testimony is not without difficulties. Condorcet wrote that a dialogue took place between the priest and the dying man:

PRIEST: Do you believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ?

VOLTAIRE: For heaven’s sake, sir, never speak any more to me of that man, and let me die in peace. (150)

Voltaire was buried in the monastery at Scellières. His remains were transferred solemnly to the Panthéon in 1791, during the French Revolution.

VOLTAIRE’S BATTLES FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Before speaking of the *ideas* of Voltaire, it seems appropriate to begin a discussion of his difficult relations with religion and injustice with his fights against the violence of religious intolerance, as a fierce knight of human rights. I have alluded to them briefly above.

The last twenty years of Voltaire’s life were mostly spent in his decisive actions against the excesses of the French judicial system, dominated by narrow and intolerant Catholic magistrates. Condemning them was perceived as condemning the church.

In his earlier years Voltaire had already faced up to the lack of human equity, for example, in the case of Adrienne Lecouvreur (1692–1730). She died a famous actress, but actors were condemned by religion, so she was excommunicated and forbidden decent burial. Voltaire was indignant. In his *Élégie sur la mort de Mademoiselle Lecouvreur*, he expressed his disgust for a frivolous nation that submitted to the shameful domination of the church, and he blamed the faintheartedness of the powerful persons who, in Condorcet’s words, “allowed a person whom they have so much admired to be quietly dishonored”. The young poet found this cowardice unforgivable, and in speaking out against it, he became the favorite prey of intolerant bishops and of the gentry, who did not accept his witty criticisms. In retaliation for these attacks Voltaire wrote *Ériphile* and *Zaïre*. The success of *Zaïre* was tremendous. It describes the contrast between the tolerant religion of Lusignan, a character of the play, and the fanaticism that forces poor *Zaïre* to commit a suicide so as not to become involved in a romantic relationship forbidden by the official rules of morality.

In 1737–1738, when Voltaire was a famous author protected by Madame de Pompadour, the case of Abbot Desfontaines is a good example of the problems posed by Voltaire’s opposition to the clergy. Desfontaines was a priest accused by public rumor of being a sexual deviant; it is likely that the priest was indeed homosexual or perhaps a pedophile. Voltaire was informed of the sad situation of the abbot; he did not know the man, and he was interested only because Desfontaines was a man of letters, a journalist as much as a priest. So Voltaire took up his cause and managed to secure the priest’s

freedom, so long as he never again appeared in Paris. Voltaire even found a refuge for the man. Desfontaines owed Voltaire his freedom, and perhaps his life. Nevertheless, Desfontaines published an insolent libel that accused Voltaire, at that time under a new threat of expatriation, of preaching sexual freedom! Voltaire, who had been suffering from such attacks, finally exploded, and his devastating written retaliation signaled his emergence as a vigorous and efficient satirist. As Thomas Babington Macaulay remarked, "Of all the intellectual weapons which have ever been wielded by man, the most terrible was the mockery of Voltaire. Bigots and tyrants, who had never been moved by the wailings and cursings of millions, turned pale at his name" (199).

More epoch making was the case of Calas. One day, in his little paradise of Ferney, Voltaire was approached by the members of the Calas family, victims of a denial of justice. The case was described at length by Voltaire himself in what is perhaps his most important work in the fight against intolerant bigotry, the 1763 *Traité sur la Tolérance* (Treatise on Toleration), which emphasizes the case of Calas.

Jean Calas was a sixty-year-old merchant in Toulouse, who was recognized as a good father. He was Protestant, and so were his wife and all his children except one, Louis, who had converted to Catholicism. The father had a tolerant and open mind and approved of his son's conversion he approved. He also employed a Catholic servant for thirty years. One of his sons, Marc-Antoine, had failed both as a lawyer and as a merchant. He was violent and gloomy and had threatened to commit suicide. One day, Marc-Antoine was found dead, hanging from a doorknob. The whole family was in despair. Soon the father and a friend were accused of having strangled the young man. The Calas family, the friend, and the servant were arrested and put in irons. Nothing was spared to build an case against them; the dead man soon became a Catholic saint, killed by vile Protestants. After a very biased discussion, a tribunal condemned the father, and he died on the wheel on March 9, 1762. His son Pierre was forced to convert to Catholicism and was banished, and the daughters were imprisoned in a convent. The exhausted mother went to Paris to find some help; three lawyers obtained a decision giving her back her daughters. Finally, the family paid a visit to Voltaire. After three years of effort, Voltaire managed to obtain a reversal of the original judgment and the rehabilitation of Jean Calas by the Paris Parliament.

Slightly later, the affair Sirven occurred. Pierre-Paul Sirven, a Protestant archivist in the southern town of Castres (in the same jurisdiction as the Calas affair), had three daughters; the second one, Elizabeth, was mentally handicapped. As a consequence of a *lettre de cachet*, she had been secretly taken away from her parents at the age of twenty-one and confined to a convent. Exhausted by the ill treatment of the nuns, she escaped and rejoined her family. Sirven then started an action against the nuns; they retaliated by accusing him of mistreating his daughter to prevent her conversion to Catholicism. Sirven felt it advisable to escape. In December 1761, Elizabeth disappeared again; her body was found in a well. Sirven was sentenced to be broken on

the wheel. The family was obliged to flee, and they found a refuge in Lausanne. Voltaire reacted as he had to the Calas affair: His 1766 *Avis au public sur les parricides imputés aux Calas et aux Sirven* was a vigorous pamphlet. In the hope of a possible rehabilitation, created by the success of Voltaire in the Calas affair, Sirven surrendered and was finally rehabilitated in 1771 by the Parliament of Toulouse.

Another case moved Voltaire, that of Marquis de Lally-Tollendal, a French officer, who had been charged with responsibility for the English defeat of the French troops in Pondichéry (India). He was condemned to death and executed on May 9, 1766. His son Gérard, a teenager, was desperate. It was with the help of Voltaire that he obtained a revision of the judgment, although on appeal, the judgment was confirmed.

More dramatic was the 1765 case of Chevalier François-Jean de la Barre. He was nineteen years old when he was accused, together with his friend Gaillard d'Étallonde, of not baring his head at the passage in the streets of d'Abbeville of the procession of the Holy Sacrament. The rumor accused them also of several other blasphemies—including the possession of Voltaire's books. In other words, they were believed to be libertines and atheists. D'Étallonde was able to escape, but de la Barre was condemned to death. When the sentence was executed, the authorities also burned Voltaire's *Dictionnaire philosophique* (Philosophical Dictionary). Voltaire was afraid that this affair might be the prelude to a kind of massacre of the philosophers. Once more, he gave the alarm, drawing attention to various irregularities in the trial. His *Relation de la mort du chevalier de la Barre* requests that "the punishment be proportional to the offense," noting that a manifestation of impiety does not harm society. But Voltaire did not succeed in effecting a revision of the verdict. In the meantime, d'Étallonde, who had found refuge in Germany, came to Ferney in 1774, and Voltaire tried to secure a pardon for the young man. It was only later that his innocence was recognized. The Republic rehabilitated de la Barre in 1793, in a last official recognition of the fight conducted by Voltaire, who said, "Innocent blood is screaming, and I too am screaming: and I shall scream until my death."

Before his death, Voltaire took care also of the case of the wife of Montbailli, who had been accused of parricide and had perished on the wheel. His wife was under the same sentence, but she was pregnant and got a stay of execution. Voltaire undertook her defense (and her husband's) in *La Méprise d'Arras*. The verdict was revised. Not only did the judges declare Madame Montbailli innocent, but they made dignified amends with respect to Montbailli himself.

VOLTAIRE AND GOD

Voltaire's great sensibility explains how and why, being the witness of so many injustices and of so much violence executed in the name of religion, he built his philosophy, the open philosophy of a freethinker. That philosophy may

often appear self-contradictory, having been formulated and written about over a long period of time.

Voltaire was clearly a deist. He believed in God as the Great Architect of the universe. Evidence of this attitude can be found in many quotations. Consider this statement: “The universe worries me, and I cannot think that such a clock exists and has no clockmaker” (“Les Cabales,” ll. 111–12). Another expression of the same idea is also celebrated: “‘If God did not exist, He would have to be invented.’ But all nature cries aloud that he does exist: that there is a supreme intelligence, an immense power, an admirable order, and everything teaches us our own dependence on it” (letter to the duc de Richelieu, November 1, 1770; *Oeuvres Complètes*, 121.58). That first sentence is a quotation of Voltaire himself, from a letter he wrote to Frederick II in 1770.

In Voltaire’s eyes, Judaism and Islam were just as irrational and absurd as Christianity. His celebrated cry, “Écrasez l’infâme,” which he uttered hundreds of times in letters and public documents from the early 1760s onward, appears to refer specifically to religious superstition, but it can be taken broadly as a condemnation of all fanaticism, whether political or religious. Voltaire was one of the first to adopt the anthropological method of accounting for the existence of religious belief: In *Philosophie de l’histoire* he made plain his belief that religion emerged in primitive times as a means of explaining and placating natural phenomena.

But obviously, Voltaire’s God was not the kind of God that humans could convince by prayers or ceremonies. This idea was very clearly expressed by Voltaire: “To pray to God is to flatter oneself that with words one can alter nature” (*Oeuvres de Voltaire*, 35.579), and much more clearly in “Prayers,” taken from his *Questions sur l’Encyclopédie*:

The Eternal has his designs from all eternity. If prayer is in accord with his immutable wishes, it is quite useless to ask of him what he has resolved to do. If one prays to him to do the contrary of what he has resolved, it is praying that he be weak, frivolous, inconstant; it is believing that he is thus, it is to mock him. Either you ask him a just thing, in which case he must do it, the thing being done without your praying to him for it, and so to entreat him is then to distrust him; or the thing is unjust, and then you insult him. You are worthy or unworthy of the grace you implore: if worthy, he knows it better than you; if unworthy, you commit another crime by requesting what is undeserved. In a word, we only pray to God because we have made him in our image. We treat him like a pasha, like a sultan whom one may provoke or appease.

And again, alluding to the second-to-last sentence: “If God has made us in his image, we have returned him the favor” (*Oeuvres de Voltaire*, 32.562).

One could quote Voltaire *ad infinitum*. Clearly, he was neither an atheist (and we shall come to that point later) nor an agnostic (i.e., one who is ready to accept either the reality of God or the absence of any God, but who is not convinced by arguments for either one or the other; in essence, agnostics abstain from any “belief”).

Was Voltaire a “deist” or a “theist”? According to some, deism is a recognition of the existence of a superpower, a creator of the universe, but a refusal to accept such things as the divinity of Jesus, the miracles of Moses, or the sacrifice by Abraham. The term *theism* essentially refers to all kinds of belief in God, including additional beliefs, such as those implied by, for example, the New Testament, the Old Testament, or the Quran. If we accept this distinction, then Voltaire was a deist. But he used the two words interchangeably.

We have seen that Voltaire rejected Jesus Christ. He did so whimsically in his allegorical “Pot-Pourri,” where Joseph is described as “Brioché,” Jesus as “Polichinelle” (Pulcinella), and other characters as still other traditional figures of the Italian *commedia dell’arte*. In this complex pamphlet, Voltaire claimed that one should not give more credit to the events of Jesus’ life than to the improbable miracles of the Old Testament. He frequently made fun of sacred things, and his works are full of ironical comments on the virginity of Mary, the miracles of Jesus, the Trinity, and so on.

VOLTAIRE AND “SUPERNATURAL RELIGION”

Actually, Voltaire considered himself the archenemy of the supernatural religion. God is, to be sure, the architect; but once the machinery is launched, everything obeys the laws of nature. In other words, God is one thing, but what is done in the name of God by churches of all sorts is a very different thing. “Superstition,” Voltaire wrote, “is to religion what astrology is to astronomy, the mad daughter of a wise mother. These daughters have too long dominated the earth” (*Treatise on Tolerance*). In regard to the relation of religion to morality, “morality is everywhere the same for all men, therefore it comes from God; sects differ, therefore they are the work of men” (*Oeuvres de Voltaire*, 17.459). Truly enough, religions are man-made, and human beings, to establish their power, use religion:

Formerly there were those who said: You believe things that are incomprehensible, inconsistent, impossible because we have commanded you to believe them; go then and do what is unjust because we command it. Such people show admirable reasoning. Truly, whoever is able to make you absurd is able to make you unjust. If the God-given understanding of your mind does not resist a demand to believe what is impossible, then you will not resist a demand to do wrong to that God-given sense of justice in your heart. As soon as one faculty of your soul has been dominated, other faculties will follow as well. And from this derives all those crimes of religion which have overrun the world. (*Questions sur des Miracles*)

Voltaire wrote on every abuse of power by the Catholic hierarchy that he could. In “On the Crusade against the People in Languedoc,” he described the atrocities (1210–1244) committed in the Albigensian Crusade, organized by Pope Innocent III, with troops led by Simon de Montfort and the blessing of the successive kings of France (among them St. Louis). The puritan Christian sect of Albigenses, defenders of the Catharist heresy, was destroyed, and their towns demolished. It was a deadly massacre, and the victims were counted by the thousands.

In Voltaire’s novels, this horror is also frequently displayed. A good example is found in *Candide*. When Candide and his tutor, Doctor Pangloss, arrive in Lisbon, they find desolation:

After the earthquake, which has destroyed three quarters of Lisbon, the country’s wise men could find no better way of preventing total ruin than to give the people a beautiful auto-da-fé. It was decided, by Coimbra University, that the sight of people being burned alive over a slow fire, and very ceremoniously, was nature’s infallible, mysterious method of keeping the earth from shaking. (18)

Pangloss and Candide, “having found a bit of food As they groped through the rubble, managed to resuscitate themselves” (17). As a consolation, Pangloss assures some of the citizens they have helped that things could not be otherwise: “This is all for the best” (17). One of the sages, “a dark-skinned little man . . . acquainted with the Inquisition, . . . spoke up, most politely: “Apparently the gentleman is not a believer in original sin?” Pangloss starts to debate, but

Pangloss was in the middle of these remarks when the dark-skinned little man gave a signal, by a movement of his head, to the attendant who was pouring him a glass of port. . . . Accordingly . . . they came and tied up Doctor Pangloss and his disciple, Candide, the one for having spoken and the other for having listened, looking as if he approved. . . . Candide was flogged in time with the music; . . . and Pangloss was hanged. . . . Candide, horror-stricken, dumb-founded, overcome, covered with blood and shaking, said to himself: ‘If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others like?’ (17–19)

The atrocities provoked by Catholicism were indeed dramatic. But Voltaire often used characters taken from the Arab-Persian-Turkish (hence Islamic) world as metaphors of Christians. Muhammad does not appear as better than Jesus in Voltaire’s eyes:

But that a camel-merchant should stir up insurrection in his village; that in league with some miserable followers he persuades them that he talks with the angel Gabriel; that he boasts of having been carried to heaven, where he received in part this unintelligible book, each page of which makes common sense shudder; that, to pay homage to this book, he delivers his country to iron and flame; that he cuts the throats of fathers and kidnaps daughters; that he gives

"And Pangloss would sometimes say to Candide: 'Everything that happens, in this best of all possible worlds, is linked to everything else, because when it comes down to it, if you hadn't been driven out of a mansion, by savage kicks in the backside, on account of your love for Miss Cunégonde, and you hadn't been taken by the Inquisition, and gone all over America on foot, and hadn't run the Baron through with a sword, and hadn't lost all your wonderful Eldorado sheep, you wouldn't be eating, here and now, lemon-peel preserves and pistachios.' 'That's well said,' replied Candide, 'but we need to work our fields.'"

—Voltaire, *Candide* (130)

to the defeated the choice of his religion or death: this is assuredly nothing any man can excuse, at least if he was not born a Turk, or if superstition has not extinguished all natural light in him. (*Oeuvres Complètes*, 91.383)

What was Voltaire's conclusion? It is clear: "Every sensible man, every honorable man, must hold the Christian sect in horror" (*Examen important de milord Bolingbroke* [1767], in *Oeuvres Complètes*, 62.350). Or still more violently, "May we not return to those scoundrels of old, the illustrious founders of superstition and fanaticism who first took the knife from the altar to make victims of those who refused to be their disciples?" (letter to Frederick II, 1740; *Oeuvres Complètes*, 91.383). In such a world, "in the absence of reason and rationality, there is only superstition and barbarism. . . . Is it any wonder that there are atheists in the world, when the church behaves so abominably?"

Abominable, barbaric, infamous—such terms reveal a true hatred. Should we tolerate the intolerable? No! Voltaire, who spent his life fighting for human rights and for tolerance, was indeed intolerant of the established religions and of the institutionalized churches. There seemed to be a sort of contradiction between Voltaire the fighter for tolerance and Voltaire the intolerant anti-Christian.

VOLTAIRE AND ATHEISM

Voltaire said, "Atheism is the vice of a few intelligent people" (*Oeuvres de Voltaire*, 17.468). This attitude was just as intolerant as the one he had toward the Catholic Church, but perhaps less justified.

Voltaire presented himself as a firm believer in God as the Great Architect. He was indignant in regard to Catholic intolerance. But why was he so aggressive toward atheism?

One should be conscious that in Voltaire's time, the term *atheist* was oftenued, wrongly, for those whom we now call deists or agnostics. There was a

tendency to confuse the rejection of Catholic dogma and rites with the rejection of all kinds of belief in God. In the article “Atheism” in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, Voltaire discussed philosophers accused of atheism. Some were really atheists, but most of them were theists, or even very devout Catholics, such as Pascal after his dramatic conversion.

In this entry, we can also read Voltaire’s main arguments for rejecting atheism. He criticized Pierre Bayle, who debated the problem of “whether a society of atheists could exist”: “Bayle . . . inquires whether idolatry is more dangerous than atheism, whether it is a greater crime not to believe in divinity than to have an unworthy opinion about it. In this he shares the views of Plutarch; he believes that it is better to have no opinion than a bad one” (*Philosophical Dictionary*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, 35.385–86). So Bayle (like Thomas Hobbes or Spinoza) was considered an atheist by Voltaire, but Voltaire admired Bayle, so he tempered his opinion by giving him a position close to agnosticism.

But atheists were different: “Atheists are bold and misguided scholars who reason badly and who, unable to understand the creation, the origin of evil and other difficulties, have recourse to the hypothesis of the eternity of things and of necessity” (*Oeuvres Complètes*, 35.389). In the opinion of modern commentators, Voltaire was guided by his final ill feelings toward Frederick II, a notoriously atheistic prince (Voltaire linking atheism with an absence of morality):

Atheism is a monstrous evil in those who govern; and also in learned men even if their lives are innocent, because from their studies they can affect those who hold office; and that, even if not as baleful as religious fanaticism, it is nearly always fatal to virtue. Above all let me add that there are fewer atheists today than there have ever been, since philosophers have perceived that there is no vegetative being without germs, no germ without design, etc., . . . and that grain is not produced by putrefaction. (*Oeuvres Complètes*, 35.391)

Voltaire expressed these views at intervals. On the publication of Baron d’Holbach’s *Système de la nature* in 1771, the indignant Voltaire could not endure the fact that the motions of planets are a consequence of the laws of nature, unlike in the deist teachings of Newton. Actually, the ideas of Voltaire are sometimes so confused that some did see in them a defense of atheism. In his last years, Voltaire was faced with a conflict between his friendship for notorious atheists and his clear belief in a God as the unique Creator. His views were expressed largely in the *Traité de métaphysique*, never published in his lifetime.

In the *Histoire de Jenni, ou le sage et l’athée* (The History of Jenni, or the Sage and the Atheist), Voltaire presented the two opposite views in the form of a long dialogue, but with a more moderate tone, although with the same conclusion. In it Voltaire, relating the adventures of the young Jenni, displayed

the arguments of two wise persons, one a real individual (John Friend, 1775–1828, professor of chemistry at Oxford University and later a member of Parliament), and the other a man named Birton, the reasonable atheist:

FREIND [*sic*]: in order to know that there is a God, I ask of you only one thing—that, is to open your eyes.

BIRTON: Ah! I see what you are coming to: you are going to bring up that old argument, so often confuted, that the sun turns on its axis in twenty-five days and a half, in spite of the absurd Inquisition of Rome; that the light comes to us reflected from Saturn in fourteen minutes, notwithstanding the absurd assumptions by Descartes, . . . that all these innumerable stars, placed in the depths of space, obey the mathematical laws discovered and demonstrated by the great Newton; that a catechist declares God to children, and that Newton proves Him to sages. . . . In a word, I believe only in Nature.

FREIND: And if I should say to you that there is no nature, and that in us, around us, and within a hundred thousand million of leagues everything is art, without any exception? . . . Reflect how those immense globes, which you see revolving in their immense orbits, observe the laws of a profound mathematics; there is, then, a great mathematician. . . . Judge then what must be the power, what must be the genius, of the eternal architect, . . . the Supreme Being. . . . We have made nothing, we can make nothing; it is given to us to arrange, to unite, to disunite, to number, to weigh, to measure; but to make! What a word! There is only the Being necessary, the Being existing eternally by itself, who creates. . . . Let us admit, then, . . . that there is a Supreme Being, necessary, incomprehensible, who has created us.”

BIRTON: And where is He? This Being? If there is one, why does He conceal himself? Has anyone ever seen Him? Should one conceal one’s self when one has done good?

FREIND: Have you ever seen Christopher Wren, who built St. Paul’s in London? And yet it is demonstrated that this building is the work of a very skilful architect. . . . You ask me where God is, I know nothing about it, and I should not know—I know that He is; I know that He is our master, that He created everything, that we should wait for all things from His goodness.

BIRTON: From His goodness! You are mocking me. You said to me—make use of your eyes; and I say to you—make use of your own; throw just one glance over the entire earth, and judge if your God is good. (*Complete Tales*, 1.147–153)

In a lengthy argument, Freind then argues about the intelligence of God and the responsibility of men in the evils of this world and claims that if evil is on the earth, then virtue is also there:

BIRTON: I will call God, with you, the intelligent and powerful principle which animates entire nature; but has He condescended to make himself known to us?

FREIND: Yes, by His works. (*Complete Tales*, 1.172)

The debate is repetitive. At the end, Birton accepts Friend's point of view, recognizing that his own ideas establish the likelihood, but not proof, that there is no God.

"If you wish depth, genius, imagination, taste, reason, sensibility, philosophy, elevation, originality, nature, intellect, fancy, rectitude, facility, flexibility, precision, art, abundance, variety, fertility, warmth, magic, charm, grace, force, an eagle sweep of vision, vast understanding, instruction rich, tone excellent, urbanity, suavity, delicacy, correctness, purity, clearness, eloquence, harmony, brilliancy, rapidity, gaiety, pathos, sublimity and universality, perfection indeed, behold Voltaire."

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, quoted in Robert G. Ingersoll,
Oration on Voltaire, (211).

This dialogue demonstrates one thing: Voltaire wanted to appear to be a believer in God, but his arguments are very simpleminded, and Birton seems to be too easily convinced. Voltaire defended ideas that he had probably held since his early studies with the Jesuits. We could almost say that his belief in God was a matter of faith, more than of logic.

CONCLUSION

At the end of his life, and during the French Revolution, Voltaire was revered, mostly for his actions in the fight against the intolerant Catholic absolute monarchy. During the period of French Romanticism (roughly the years 1830–1850), his ironic and skeptical attitude was criticized by the austere Romantics. Typical is the cry by Alfred de Musset in his 1833 poem *Rolla*: "Do you sleep happily, Voltaire? And is your hideous smile still flitting on your fleshless bones?" (21). Later on, the aristocratic side of Voltaire made his figure marginal, and he was praised mostly for his witty novels, but certainly not as a leading figure in philosophy.

Voltaire is at present mostly praised for the rightness of his battles against the intolerant Catholic establishment and perhaps still more for the quality of his prose and its efficiency in the fights he conducted. Isaac Asimov expressed his deep admiration: "There is no one on record who ever involved himself in a controversy with Voltaire without coming out shredded and a laughingstock" (223).

And let Robert G. Ingersoll deliver the final and still more positive conclusion:

Voltaire! A name that excites the admiration of men, the malignity of priests. Pronounce that name in the presence of a clergyman, and you will find that you

have made a declaration of war. Pronounce that name, and from the face of the priest the mask of meekness will fall, and from the mouth of forgiveness will pour a Niagara of vituperation and calumny. And yet Voltaire was the greatest man of his century, and did more to free the human race than any other of the sons of men. (181)

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