

THE END OF FAITH

Religion, Terror,

and the Future of Reason

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W • W • NORTON & COMPANY

NEW YORK LONDON

Contents

1	<i>Reason in Exile</i>	11
2	<i>The Nature of Belief</i>	50
3	<i>In the Shadow of God</i>	80
4	<i>The Problem with Islam</i>	108
5	<i>West of Eden</i>	153
6	<i>A Science of Good and Evil</i>	170
7	<i>Experiments in Consciousness</i>	204
	<i>Epilogue</i>	223
	<i>Afterword</i>	229
	<i>Notes</i>	239
	<i>Bibliography</i>	303
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	333
	<i>Index</i>	335

1

Reason in Exile

THE young man boards the bus as it leaves the terminal. He wears an overcoat. Beneath his overcoat, he is wearing a bomb. His pockets are filled with nails, ball bearings, and rat poison.

The bus is crowded and headed for the heart of the city. The young man takes his seat beside a middle-aged couple. He will wait for the bus to reach its next stop. The couple at his side appears to be shopping for a new refrigerator. The woman has decided on a model, but her husband worries that it will be too expensive. He indicates another one in a brochure that lies open on her lap. The next stop comes into view. The bus doors swing. The woman observes that the model her husband has selected will not fit in the space underneath their cabinets. New passengers have taken the last remaining seats and begun gathering in the aisle. The bus is now full. The young man smiles. With the press of a button he destroys himself, the couple at his side, and twenty others on the bus. The nails, ball bearings, and rat poison ensure further casualties on the street and in the surrounding cars. All has gone according to plan.

The young man's parents soon learn of his fate. Although saddened to have lost a son, they feel tremendous pride at his accomplishment. They know that he has gone to heaven and prepared the way for them to follow. He has also sent his victims to hell for eternity. It is a double victory. The neighbors find the event a great cause for celebration and honor the young man's parents by giving them gifts of food and money.

These are the facts. This is all we know for certain about the

young man. Is there anything else that we can infer about him on the basis of his behavior? Was he popular in school? Was he rich or was he poor? Was he of low or high intelligence? His actions leave no clue at all. Did he have a college education? Did he have a bright future as a mechanical engineer? His behavior is simply mute on questions of this sort, and hundreds like them.¹ Why is it so easy, then, so trivially easy—you-could-almost-bet-your-life-on-it easy—to guess the young man's religion?²

A BELIEF is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life. Are you a scientist? A liberal? A racist? These are merely species of belief in action. Your beliefs define your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior; they determine your emotional responses to other human beings. If you doubt this, consider how your experience would suddenly change if you came to believe one of the following propositions:

1. You have only two weeks to live.
2. You've just won a lottery prize of one hundred million dollars.
3. Aliens have implanted a receiver in your skull and are manipulating your thoughts.

These are mere words—until you believe them. Once believed, they become part of the very apparatus of your mind, determining your desires, fears, expectations, and subsequent behavior.

There seems, however, to be a problem with some of our most cherished beliefs about the world: they are leading us, inexorably, to kill one another. A glance at history, or at the pages of any newspaper, reveals that ideas which divide one group of human beings from another, only to unite them in slaughter, generally have their roots in religion. It seems that if our species ever eradicates itself through war, it will not be because it was written in the stars but because it was written in our books; it is what we do with words like "God" and "paradise" and "sin" in the present that will determine our future.

Our situation is this: most of the people in this world believe that the Creator of the universe has written a book. We have the misfortune of having many such books on hand, each making an exclusive claim as to its infallibility. People tend to organize themselves into factions according to which of these incompatible claims they accept—rather than on the basis of language, skin color, location of birth, or any other criterion of tribalism. Each of these texts urges its readers to adopt a variety of beliefs and practices, some of which are benign, many of which are not. All are in perverse agreement on one point of fundamental importance, however: "respect" for other faiths, or for the views of unbelievers, is not an attitude that God endorses. While all faiths have been touched, here and there, by the spirit of ecumenicalism, the central tenet of every religious tradition is that all others are mere repositories of error or, at best, dangerously incomplete. Intolerance is thus intrinsic to every creed. Once a person believes—*really* believes—that certain ideas can lead to eternal happiness, or to its antithesis, he cannot tolerate the possibility that the people he loves might be led astray by the blandishments of unbelievers. Certainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one.

Observations of this sort pose an immediate problem for us, however, because criticizing a person's faith is currently taboo in every corner of our culture. On this subject, liberals and conservatives have reached a rare consensus: religious beliefs are simply beyond the scope of rational discourse. Criticizing a person's ideas about God and the afterlife is thought to be impolitic in a way that criticizing his ideas about physics or history is not. And so it is that when a Muslim suicide bomber obliterates himself along with a score of innocents on a Jerusalem street, the role that faith played in his actions is invariably discounted. His motives must have been political, economic, or entirely personal. Without faith, desperate people would still do terrible things. Faith itself is always, and everywhere, exonerated.

But technology has a way of creating fresh moral imperatives. Our technical advances in the art of war have finally rendered our

religious differences—and hence our religious *beliefs*—antithetical to our survival. We can no longer ignore the fact that billions of our neighbors believe in the metaphysics of martyrdom, or in the literal truth of the book of Revelation, or any of the other fantastical notions that have lurked in the minds of the faithful for millennia—because our neighbors are now armed with chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. There is no doubt that these developments mark the terminal phase of our credulity. Words like "God" and "Allah" must go the way of "Apollo" and "Baal," or they will unmake our world.

A few minutes spent wandering the graveyard of bad ideas suggests that such conceptual revolutions are possible. Consider the case of alchemy: it fascinated human beings for over a thousand years, and yet anyone who seriously claims to be a practicing alchemist today will have disqualified himself for most positions of responsibility in our society. Faith-based religion must suffer the same slide into obsolescence.

What is the alternative to religion as we know it? As it turns out, this is the wrong question to ask. Chemistry was not an "alternative" to alchemy; it was a wholesale exchange of ignorance at its most rococo for genuine knowledge.³ We will find that, as with alchemy, to speak of "alternatives" to religious faith is to miss the point.

OF COURSE, people of faith fall on a continuum: some draw solace and inspiration from a specific spiritual tradition, and yet remain fully committed to tolerance and diversity, while others would burn the earth to cinders if it would put an end to heresy. There are, in other words, religious *moderates* and religious *extremists*, and their various passions and projects should not be confused. One of the central themes of this book, however, is that religious moderates are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine that the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect

the unjustified beliefs of others. I hope to show that the very ideal of religious tolerance—born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God—is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss.

We have been slow to recognize the degree to which religious faith perpetuates man's inhumanity to man. This is not surprising, since many of us still believe that faith is an essential component of human life. Two myths now keep faith beyond the fray of rational criticism, and they seem to foster religious extremism and religious moderation equally: (1) most of us believe that there are good things that people get from religious faith (e.g., strong communities, ethical behavior, spiritual experience) that cannot be had elsewhere; (2) many of us also believe that the terrible things that are sometimes done in the name of religion are the products not of *faith* per se but of our baser natures—forces like greed, hatred, and fear—for which religious beliefs are themselves the best (or even the only) remedy. Taken together, these myths seem to have granted us perfect immunity to outbreaks of reasonableness in our public discourse.

Many religious moderates have taken the apparent high road of pluralism, asserting the equal validity of all faiths, but in doing so they neglect to notice the irredeemably sectarian truth claims of each. As long as a Christian believes that only his baptized brethren will be saved on the Day of Judgment, he cannot possibly "respect" the beliefs of others, for he knows that the flames of hell have been stoked by these very ideas and await their adherents even now. Muslims and Jews generally take the same arrogant view of their own enterprises and have spent millennia passionately reiterating the errors of other faiths. It should go without saying that these rival belief systems are all equally uncontaminated by evidence.

And yet, intellectuals as diverse as H. G. Wells, Albert Einstein, Carl Jung, Max Planck, Freeman Dyson, and Stephen Jay Gould have declared the war between reason and faith to be long over. On this view, there is no need to have all of our beliefs about the universe cohere. A person can be a God-fearing Christian on Sunday and a

working scientist come Monday morning, without ever having to account for the partition that seems to have erected itself in his head while he slept. He can, as it were, have his reason and eat it too. As the early chapters of this book will illustrate, it is only because the church has been politically hobbled in the West that anyone can afford to think this way. In places where scholars can still be stoned to death for doubting the veracity of the Koran, Gould's notion of a "loving concordat" between faith and reason would be perfectly delusional.⁴

This is not to say that the deepest concerns of the faithful, whether moderate or extreme, are trivial or even misguided. There is no denying that most of us have emotional and spiritual needs that are now addressed—however obliquely and at a terrible price—by mainstream religion. And these are needs that a mere *understanding* of our world, scientific or otherwise, will never fulfill. There is clearly a sacred dimension to our existence, and coming to terms with it could well be the highest purpose of human life. But we will find that it requires no faith in untestable propositions—Jesus was born of a virgin; the Koran is the word of God—for us to do this.

The Myth of "Moderation" in Religion

The idea that any one of our religions represents the infallible word of the One True God requires an encyclopedic ignorance of history, mythology, and art even to be entertained—as the beliefs, rituals, and iconography of each of our religions attest to centuries of cross-pollination among them. Whatever their imagined source, the doctrines of modern religions are no more tenable than those which, for lack of adherents, were cast upon the scrap heap of mythology millennia ago; for there is no more evidence to justify a belief in the literal existence of Yahweh and Satan than there was to keep Zeus perched upon his mountain throne or Poseidon churning the seas.

According to Gallup, 35 percent of Americans believe that the Bible is the literal and inerrant word of the Creator of the universe.⁵ Another 48 percent believe that it is the "inspired" word of the same—still inerrant, though certain of its passages must be interpreted symbolically before their truth can be brought to light. Only 17 percent of us remain to doubt that a personal God, in his infinite wisdom, is likely to have authored this text—or, for that matter, to have created the earth with its 250,000 species of beetles. Some 46 percent of Americans take a literalist view of creation (40 percent believe that God has guided creation over the course of millions of years). This means that 120 million of us place the big bang 2,500 years *after* the Babylonians and Sumerians learned to brew beer. If our polls are to be trusted, nearly 230 million Americans believe that a book showing neither unity of style nor internal consistency was authored by an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent deity. A survey of Hindus, Muslims, and Jews around the world would surely yield similar results, revealing that we, as a species, have grown almost perfectly intoxicated by our myths. How is it that, in this one area of our lives, we have convinced ourselves that our beliefs about the world can float entirely free of reason and evidence?

It is with respect to this rather surprising cognitive scenery that we must decide what it means to be a religious "moderate" in the twenty-first century. Moderates in every faith are obliged to loosely interpret (or simply ignore) much of their canons in the interests of living in the modern world. No doubt an obscure truth of economics is at work here: societies appear to become considerably less productive whenever large numbers of people stop making widgets and begin killing their customers and creditors for heresy. The first thing to observe about the moderate's retreat from scriptural literalism is that it draws its inspiration not from scripture but from cultural developments that have rendered many of God's utterances difficult to accept as written. In America, religious moderation is further enforced by the fact that most Christians and Jews do not read the Bible in its entirety and consequently have no idea just how

vigorously the God of Abraham wants heresy expunged. One look at the book of Deuteronomy reveals that he has something very specific in mind should your son or daughter return from yoga class advocating the worship of Krishna:

If your brother, the son of your father or of your mother, or your son or daughter, or the spouse whom you embrace, or your most intimate friend, tries to secretly seduce you, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods," unknown to you or your ancestors before you, gods of the peoples surrounding you, whether near you or far away, anywhere throughout the world, you must not consent, you must not listen to him; you must show him no pity, you must not spare him or conceal his guilt. No, you must kill him, your hand must strike the first blow in putting him to death and the hands of the rest of the people following. You must stone him to death, since he has tried to divert you from Yahweh your God. . . . (Deuteronomy 13:7-11)

While the stoning of children for heresy has fallen out of fashion in our country, you will not hear a moderate Christian or Jew arguing for a "symbolic" reading of passages of this sort. (In fact, one seems to be explicitly blocked by God himself in Deuteronomy 13:1—"Whatever I am now commanding you, you must keep and observe, adding nothing to it, taking nothing away") The above passage is as canonical as any in the Bible, and it is only by ignoring such barbarisms that the Good Book can be reconciled with life in the modern world. This is a problem for "moderation" in religion: it has nothing underwriting it other than the unacknowledged neglect of the letter of the divine law.

The only reason anyone is "moderate" in matters of faith these days is that he has assimilated some of the fruits of the last two thousand years of human thought (democratic politics,⁶ scientific advancement on every front, concern for human rights, an end to cultural and geographic isolation, etc). The doors leading out of

scriptural literalism do not open from the *inside*. The moderation we see among nonfundamentalists is not some sign that faith itself has evolved; it is, rather, the product of the many hammer blows of modernity that have exposed certain tenets of faith to doubt. Not the least among these developments has been the emergence of our tendency to value evidence and to be convinced by a proposition to the degree that there is evidence for it. Even most fundamentalists live by the lights of reason in this regard; it is just that their minds seem to have been partitioned to accommodate the profligate truth claims of their faith. Tell a devout Christian that his wife is cheating on him, or that frozen yogurt can make a man invisible, and he is likely to require as much evidence as anyone else, and to be persuaded only to the extent that you give it. Tell him that the book he keeps by his bed was written by an invisible deity who will punish him with fire for eternity if he fails to accept its every incredible claim about the universe, and he seems to require no evidence whatsoever.

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. Having heard something about the medical discoveries of the last hundred years, most of us no longer equate disease processes with sin or demonic possession. Having learned about the known distances between objects in our universe, most of us (about half of us, actually) find the idea that the whole works was created six thousand years ago (with light from distant stars already in transit toward the earth) impossible to take seriously. Such concessions to modernity do not in the least suggest that faith is compatible with reason, or that our religious traditions are in principle open to new learning: it is just that the utility of ignoring (or "reinterpreting") certain articles of faith is now overwhelming. Anyone being flown to a distant city for heart-bypass surgery has conceded, tacitly at least, that we have learned a few things about physics, geography, engineering, and medicine since the time of Moses.

So it is not that these texts have maintained their integrity over time (they haven't); it is just that they have been effectively edited by our neglect of certain of their passages. Most of what remains—the "good parts"—has been spared the same winnowing because we do not yet have a truly modern understanding of our ethical intuitions and our capacity for spiritual experience. If we better understood the workings of the human brain, we would undoubtedly discover lawful connections between our states of consciousness, our modes of conduct, and the various ways we use our attention. What makes one person happier than another? Why is love more conducive to happiness than hate? Why do we generally prefer beauty to ugliness and order to chaos? Why does it feel so good to smile and laugh, and why do these shared experiences generally bring people closer together? Is the ego an illusion, and, if so, what implications does this have for human life? Is there life after death? These are ultimately questions for a mature science of the mind. If we ever develop such a science, most of our religious texts will be no more useful to mystics than they now are to astronomers.

While moderation in religion may seem a reasonable position to stake out, in light of all that we have (and have not) learned about the universe, it offers no bulwark against religious extremism and religious violence. From the perspective of those seeking to live by the letter of the texts, the religious moderate is nothing more than a failed fundamentalist. He is, in all likelihood, going to wind up in hell with the rest of the unbelievers. The problem that religious moderation poses for all of us is that it does not permit anything very critical to be said about religious literalism. We cannot say that fundamentalists are crazy, because they are merely practicing their freedom of belief; we cannot even say that they are mistaken in *religious* terms, because their knowledge of scripture is generally unrivaled. All we can say, as religious moderates, is that we don't like the personal and social costs that a full embrace of scripture imposes on us. This is not a new form of faith, or even a new species of scriptural exegesis; it is simply a capitulation to a variety of

all-too-human interests that have nothing, in principle, to do with God. Religious moderation is the product of *secular* knowledge and scriptural *ignorance*—and it has no bona fides, in religious terms, to put it on a par with fundamentalism.⁷ The texts themselves are unequivocal: they are perfect in all their parts. By their light, religious moderation appears to be nothing more than an unwillingness to fully submit to God's law. By failing to live by the letter of the texts, while tolerating the irrationality of those who do, religious moderates betray faith and reason equally. Unless the core dogmas of faith are called into question—i.e., that we know there is a God, and that we know what he wants from us—religious moderation will do nothing to lead us out of the wilderness.

The benignity of most religious moderates does not suggest that religious faith is anything more sublime than a desperate marriage of hope and ignorance, nor does it guarantee that there is not a terrible price to be paid for limiting the scope of reason in our dealings with other human beings. Religious moderation, insofar as it represents an attempt to hold on to what is still serviceable in orthodox religion, closes the door to more sophisticated approaches to spirituality, ethics, and the building of strong communities. Religious moderates seem to believe that what we need is not radical insight and innovation in these areas but a mere dilution of Iron Age philosophy. Rather than bring the full force of our creativity and rationality to bear on the problems of ethics, social cohesion, and even spiritual experience, moderates merely ask that we relax our standards of adherence to ancient superstitions and taboos, while otherwise maintaining a belief system that was passed down to us from men and women whose lives were simply ravaged by their basic ignorance about the world. In what other sphere of life is such subservience to tradition acceptable? Medicine? Engineering? Not even politics suffers the anachronism that still dominates our thinking about ethical values and spiritual experience.

Imagine that we could revive a well-educated Christian of the fourteenth century. The man would prove to be a total ignoramus,

except on matters of faith. His beliefs about geography, astronomy, and medicine would embarrass even a child, but he would know more or less everything there is to know about God. Though he would be considered a fool to think that the earth is the center of the cosmos, or that trepanning* constitutes a wise medical intervention, his religious ideas would still be beyond reproach. There are two explanations for this: either we perfected our religious understanding of the world a millennium ago—while our knowledge on all other fronts was still hopelessly inchoate—or religion, being the mere maintenance of dogma, is one area of discourse that does not admit of progress. We will see that there is much to recommend the latter view.

With each passing year, do our religious beliefs conserve more and more of the data of human experience? If religion addresses a genuine sphere of understanding and human necessity, then it should be susceptible to *progress*; its doctrines should become more useful, rather than less. Progress in religion, as in other fields, would have to be a matter of *present* inquiry, not the mere reiteration of past doctrine. Whatever is true now should be *discoverable* now, and describable in terms that are not an outright affront to the rest of what we know about the world. By this measure, the entire project of religion seems perfectly backward. It cannot survive the changes that have come over us—culturally, technologically, and even ethically. Otherwise, there are few reasons to believe that we will survive *it*.

Moderates do not want to kill anyone in the name of God, but they want us to keep using the word "God" as though we knew what we were talking about. And they do not want anything too critical said about people who *really* believe in the God of their fathers, because tolerance, perhaps above all else, is sacred. To speak plainly

*Trepanning (or trephining) is the practice of boring holes in the human skull. Archaeological evidence suggests that it is one of the oldest surgical procedures. It was presumably performed on epileptics and the mentally ill as an attempt at exorcism. While there are still many reasons to open a person's skull nowadays, the hope that an evil spirit will use the hole as a point of egress is not among them.

and truthfully about the state of our world—to say, for instance, that the Bible and the Koran both contain mountains of life-destroying gibberish—is antithetical to tolerance as moderates currently conceive it. But we can no longer afford the luxury of such political correctness. We must finally recognize the price we are paying to maintain the iconography of our ignorance.

The Shadow of the Past

Finding ourselves in a universe that seems bent upon destroying us, we quickly discover, both as individuals and as societies, that it is a good thing to understand the forces arrayed against us. And so it is that every human being comes to desire genuine knowledge about the world. This has always posed a special problem for religion, because every religion preaches the truth of propositions for which it has no evidence. In fact, every religion preaches the truth of propositions for which no evidence is even *conceivable*. This put the "leap" in Kierkegaard's leap of faith.

What if all our knowledge about the world were suddenly to disappear? Imagine that six billion of us wake up tomorrow morning in a state of utter ignorance and confusion. Our books and computers are still here, but we can't make heads or tails of their contents. We have even forgotten how to drive our cars and brush our teeth. What knowledge would we want to reclaim first? Well, there's that business about growing food and building shelter that we would want to get reacquainted with. We would want to relearn how to use and repair many of our machines. Learning to understand spoken and written language would also be a top priority, given that these skills are necessary for acquiring most others. When in this process of reclaiming our humanity will it be important to know that Jesus was born of a virgin? Or that he was resurrected? And how would we relearn these truths, if they are indeed *true*? By reading the Bible? Our tour of the shelves will deliver similar pearls from antiquity—

like the "fact" that Isis, the goddess of fertility, sports an impressive pair of cow horns. Reading further, we will learn that Thor carries a hammer and that Marduk's sacred animals are horses, dogs, and a dragon with a forked tongue. Whom shall we give top billing in our resurrected world? Yaweh or Shiva? And when will we want to relearn that premarital sex is a sin? Or that adulteresses should be stoned to death? Or that the soul enters the zygote at the moment of conception? And what will we think of those curious people who begin proclaiming that one of our books is distinct from all others in that it was actually written by the Creator of the universe?

There are undoubtedly spiritual truths that we would want to relearn—once we manage to feed and clothe ourselves—and these are truths that we have learned imperfectly in our present state. How is it possible, for instance, to overcome one's fear and inwardness and simply love other human beings? Assume, for the moment, that such a process of personal transformation exists and that there is something worth knowing about it; there is, in other words, some skill, or discipline, or conceptual understanding, or dietary supplement that allows for the reliable transformation of fearful, hateful, or indifferent persons into loving ones. If so, we should be positively desperate to know about it. There may even be a few biblical passages that would be useful in this regard—but as for whole rafts of untestable doctrines, clearly there would be no reasonable basis to take them up again. The Bible and Koran, it seems certain, would find themselves respectfully shelved next to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

The point is that most of what we currently hold sacred is not sacred for any reason other than that it was thought sacred *yesterday*. Surely, if we could create the world anew, the practice of organizing our lives around untestable propositions found in ancient literature—to say nothing of killing and dying for them—would be impossible to justify. What stops us from finding it impossible *now*?

Many have observed that religion, by lending meaning to human life, permits communities (at least those united under a single faith)

to cohere. Historically this is true, and on this score religion is to be credited as much for wars of conquest as for feast days and brotherly love. But in its effect upon the *modern* world—a world already united, at least potentially, by economic, environmental, political, and epidemiological necessity—religious ideology is dangerously retrograde. Our past is not sacred for being *past*, and there is much that is behind us that we are struggling to *keep* behind us, and to which, it is to be hoped, we could never return with a clear conscience: the divine right of kings, feudalism, the caste system, slavery, political executions, forced castration, vivisection, bearbaiting, honorable duels, chastity belts, trial by ordeal, child labor, human and animal sacrifice, the stoning of heretics, cannibalism, sodomy laws, taboos against contraception, human radiation experiments—the list is nearly endless, and if it were extended indefinitely, the proportion of abuses for which religion could be found directly responsible is likely to remain undiminished. In fact, almost every indignity just mentioned can be attributed to an insufficient taste for evidence, to an uncritical faith in one dogma or another. The idea, therefore, that religious faith is somehow a *sacred* human convention—distinguished, as it is, both by the extravagance of its claims and by the paucity of its evidence—is really too great a monstrosity to be appreciated in all its glory. Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity—a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible. When foisted upon each generation anew, it renders us incapable of realizing just how much of our world has been unnecessarily ceded to a dark and barbarous past.

The Burden of Paradise

Our world is fast succumbing to the activities of men and women who would stake the future of our species on beliefs that should not survive an elementary school education. That so many of us are still

dying on account of ancient myths is as bewildering as it is horrible, and our own attachment to these myths, whether moderate or extreme, has kept us silent in the face of developments that could ultimately destroy us. Indeed, religion is as much a living spring of violence today as it was at any time in the past. The recent conflicts in Palestine (Jews v. Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians v. Catholic Croats; Orthodox Serbians v. Bosnian and Albanian Muslims), Northern Ireland (Protestants v. Catholics), Kashmir (Muslims v. Hindus), Sudan (Muslims v. Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims v. Christians), Ethiopia and Eritrea (Muslims v. Christians), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists v. Tamil Hindus), Indonesia (Muslims v. Timorese Christians), and the Caucasus (Orthodox Russians v. Chechen Muslims; Muslim Azerbaijanis v. Catholic and Orthodox Armenians) are merely a few cases in point. In these places religion has been the *explicit* cause of literally millions of deaths in the last ten years. These events should strike us like psychological experiments run amok, for that is what they are. Give people divergent, irreconcilable, and untestable notions about what happens after death, and then oblige them to live together with limited resources. The result is just what we see: an unending cycle of murder and cease-fire. If history reveals any categorical truth, it is that an insufficient taste for evidence regularly brings out the worst in us. Add weapons of mass destruction to this diabolical clockwork, and you have found a recipe for the fall of civilization.

What can be said of the nuclear brinkmanship between India and Pakistan if their divergent religious beliefs are to be "respected"? There is nothing for religious pluralists to criticize but each country's poor diplomacy—while, in truth, the entire conflict is born of an irrational embrace of myth. Over one million people died in the orgy of religious killing that attended the partitioning of India and Pakistan. The two countries have since fought three official wars, suffered a continuous bloodletting at their shared border, and are now poised to exterminate one another with nuclear weapons simply because they disagree about "facts" that are every bit as fanciful

as the names of Santa's reindeer. And their discourse is such that they are capable of mustering a suicidal level of enthusiasm for these subjects *without* evidence. Their conflict is only nominally about land, because their incompatible claims upon the territory of Kashmir are a direct consequence of their religious differences. Indeed, the only reason India and Pakistan are different countries is that the beliefs of Islam cannot be reconciled with those of Hinduism. From the point of view of Islam, it would be scarcely possible to conceive a way of scandalizing Allah that is not perpetrated, each morning, by some observant Hindu. The "land" these people are actually fighting over is not to be found in this world. When will we realize that the concessions we have made to faith in our political discourse have prevented us from even speaking about, much less uprooting, the most prolific source of violence in our history?

Mothers were skewered on swords as their children watched. Young women were stripped and raped in broad daylight, then ... set on fire. A pregnant woman's belly was slit open, her fetus raised skyward on the tip of sword and then tossed onto one of the fires that blazed across the city.⁸

This is not an account of the Middle Ages, nor is it a tale from Middle Earth. This is *our* world. The cause of this behavior was not economic, it was not racial, and it was not political. The above passage describes the violence that erupted between Hindus and Muslims in India in the winter of 2002. The only difference between these groups consists in what they believe about God. Over one thousand people died in this monthlong series of riots—nearly half as many as have died in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in more than a decade. And these are tiny numbers, considering the possibilities. A nuclear war between India and Pakistan seems almost inevitable, given what most Indians and Pakistanis believe about the afterlife. Arundhati Roy has said that Western concern over this situation is just a matter of white imperialists believing that "blacks cannot be trusted

with the Bomb."⁹ This is a grotesque charge. One might argue that no group of people can quite be "trusted" with the bomb, but to ignore the destabilizing role that religion plays on the subcontinent is both reckless and disingenuous. We can only hope that the forces of secularism and rationality will keep the missiles in their silos for a while yet, until the deeper reasons for this conflict can be finally addressed.

While I do not mean to single out the doctrine of Islam for special abuse, there is no question that, at this point in history, it represents a unique danger to all of us, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Needless to say, many Muslims are basically rational and tolerant of others. As we will see, however, these modern virtues are not likely to be products of their faith. In chapter 4, I will argue that insofar as a person is *observant* of the doctrine of Islam—that is, insofar as he *really* believes it—he will pose a problem for us. Indeed, it has grown rather obvious that the liabilities of the Muslim faith are by no means confined to the beliefs of Muslim "extremists." The response of the Muslim world to the events of September 11, 2001, leaves no doubt that a significant number of human beings in the twenty-first century believe in the possibility of martyrdom. We have, in response to this improbable fact, declared a war on "terrorism." This is rather like declaring war on "murder"; it is a category error that obscures the true cause of our troubles. Terrorism is not a *source* of human violence, but merely one its inflections. If Osama bin Laden were the leader of a nation, and the World Trade Center had been brought down with missiles, the atrocities of September 11 would have been acts of war. It should go without saying that we would have resisted the temptation to declare a war on "war" in response.

To see that our problem is with Islam itself, and not merely with "terrorism," we need only ask ourselves *why* Muslim terrorists do what they do. Why would someone as conspicuously devoid of personal grievances or psychological dysfunction as Osama bin Laden—who is neither poor, uneducated, delusional, nor a prior victim of

Western aggression—devote himself to cave-dwelling machinations with the intention of killing innumerable men, women, and children he has never met? The answer to this question is obvious—if only because it has been patiently articulated ad nauseam by bin Laden himself. The answer is that men like bin Laden *actually* believe what they say they believe. They believe in the literal truth of the Koran. Why did nineteen well-educated, middle-class men trade their lives in this world for the privilege of killing thousands of our neighbors? Because they believed that they would go straight to paradise for doing so. It is rare to find the behavior of human beings so fully and satisfactorily explained. Why have we been reluctant to accept this explanation?

As we have seen, there is something that most Americans share with Osama bin Laden, the nineteen hijackers, and much of the Muslim world. We, too, cherish the idea that certain fantastic propositions can be believed without evidence. Such heroic acts of credulity are thought not only acceptable but redeeming—even *necessary*. This is a problem that is considerably deeper and more troubling than the problem of anthrax in the mail. The concessions we have made to religious faith—to the idea that belief can be sanctified by something other than *evidence*—have rendered us unable to name, much less address, one of the most pervasive causes of conflict in our world.

Muslim Extremism

It is important to specify the dimension in which Muslim "extremists" are actually extreme. They are extreme in their *faith*. They are extreme in their devotion to the literal word of the Koran and the hadith (the literature recounting the sayings and actions of the Prophet), and *this* leads them to be extreme in the degree to which they believe that modernity and secular culture are incompatible with moral and spiritual health. Muslim extremists are certain that the exports of Western culture are leading their wives and children

away from God. They also consider our unbelief to be a sin so grave that it merits death whenever it becomes an impediment to the spread of Islam. These sundry passions are not reducible to "hatred" in any ordinary sense. Most Muslim extremists have never been to America or even met an American. And they have far fewer grievances with Western imperialism than is the norm around the globe.¹⁰ Above all, they appear to be suffering from a fear of contamination. As has been widely noted, they are also consumed by feelings of "humiliation"—humiliation over the fact that while their civilization has foundered, they have watched a godless, sin-loving people become the masters of everything they touch. This feeling is also a product of their faith. Muslims do not merely feel the outrage of the poor who are deprived of the necessities of life. They feel the outrage of a chosen people who have been subjugated by barbarians. Osama bin Laden wants for nothing. What, then, does he want? He has not called for the equal distribution of wealth around the globe. Even his demand for Palestinian statehood seems an afterthought, stemming as much from his anti-Semitism as from any solidarity he feels with the Palestinians (needless to say, such anti-Semitism and solidarity are also products of his faith). He seems most exercised over the presence of unbelievers (American troops and Jews) in the Muslim holy land and over what he imagines to be the territorial ambitions of Zionists. These are purely theological grievances. It would be much better, for all concerned, if he merely hated us.

To be sure, hatred is an eminently human emotion, and it is obvious that many Muslim extremists feel it. But faith is still the mother of hatred here, as it is wherever people define their moral identities in religious terms. The only salient difference between Muslims and non-Muslims is that the latter have not proclaimed their faith in Allah, and in Mohammed as his prophet. Islam is a missionary religion: there is not likely to be an underlying doctrine of racism, or even nationalism, animating the militant Muslim world. Muslims can be both racist and nationalistic, of course, but it seems all but

certain that if the West underwent a massive conversion to Islam—and, perforce, repudiated all Jewish interests in the Holy Land—the basis for Muslim "hatred" would simply disappear.¹¹

Most Muslims who commit atrocities are explicit about their desire to get to paradise. One failed Palestinian suicide bomber described being "pushed" to attack Israelis by "the love of martyrdom." He added, "I didn't want revenge for anything. I just wanted to be a martyr." Mr. Zaydan, the would-be martyr, conceded that his Jewish captors were "better than many, many Arabs." With regard to the suffering that his death would have inflicted upon his family, he reminded his interviewer that a martyr gets to pick seventy people to join him in paradise. He would have been sure to invite his family along.¹²

AS I HAVE SAID, people of faith tend to argue that it is not faith itself but man's baser nature that inspires such violence. But I take it to be self-evident that ordinary people cannot be moved to burn genial old scholars alive for blaspheming the Koran,¹³ or celebrate the violent deaths of their children, unless they believe some improbable things about the nature of the universe. Because most religions offer no valid mechanism by which their core beliefs can be tested and revised, each new generation of believers is condemned to inherit the superstitions and tribal hatreds of its predecessors. If we would speak of the baseness of our natures, our willingness to live, kill, and die on account of propositions for which we have no evidence should be among the first topics of discussion.

Most people in positions of leadership in our country will say that there is no direct link between the Muslim faith and "terrorism." It is clear, however, that Muslims hate the West in the very terms of their faith and that the Koran mandates such hatred. It is widely claimed by "moderate" Muslims that the Koran mandates nothing of the kind and that Islam is a "religion of peace." But one need only read the Koran itself to see that this is untrue:

Prophet, make war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal rigorously with them. Hell shall be their home: an evil fate. (Koran 9:73)

Believers, make war on the infidels who dwell around you. Deal firmly with them. Know that God is with the righteous. (Koran 9:123)

Religious Muslims cannot help but disdain a culture that, to the degree that it is secular, is a culture of infidels; to the degree that it is religious, our culture is the product of a partial revelation (that of Christians and Jews), inferior in every respect to the revelation of Islam. The reality that the West currently enjoys far more wealth and temporal power than any nation under Islam is viewed by devout Muslims as a diabolical perversity, and this situation will always stand as an open invitation for jihad. Insofar as a person is Muslim—that is, insofar as he believes that Islam constitutes the only viable path to God and that the Koran enunciates it perfectly—he will feel contempt for any man or woman who doubts the truth of his beliefs. What is more, he will feel that the eternal happiness of his children is put in peril by the mere presence of such unbelievers in the world. If such people happen to be making the policies under which he and his children must live, the potential for violence imposed by his beliefs seems unlikely to dissipate. This is why economic advantages and education, in and of themselves, are insufficient remedies for the causes of religious violence. There is no doubt that many well-educated, middle-class fundamentalists are ready to kill and die for God. As Samuel Huntington¹⁴ and others have observed, religious fundamentalism in the developing world is not, principally, a movement of the poor and uneducated.

To see the role that faith plays in propagating Muslim violence, we need only ask why so many Muslims are eager to turn themselves into bombs these days. The answer: because the Koran makes this activity seem like a career opportunity. Nothing in the history

of Western colonialism explains this behavior (though we can certainly concede that this history offers us much to atone for). Subtract the Muslim belief in martyrdom and jihad, and the actions of suicide bombers become completely unintelligible, as does the spectacle of public jubilation that invariably follows their deaths; insert these peculiar beliefs, and one can only marvel that suicide bombing is not more widespread. Anyone who says that the doctrines of Islam have "nothing to do with terrorism"—and our airways have been filled with apologists for Islam making this claim—is just playing a game with words.

The believers who stay at home—apart from those that suffer from a grave impediment—are not the equal of those who fight for the cause of God with their goods and their persons. God has given those that fight with their goods and their persons a higher rank than those who stay at home. God has promised all a good reward; but far richer is the recompense of those who fight for Him.... He that leaves his dwelling to fight for God and His apostle and is then overtaken by death, shall be rewarded by God. . . . The unbelievers are your inveterate enemies. (Koran 4:95-101)

Outright prestidigitation with the articles of faith regularly produces utterances of this sort: "Islam is a religion of peace. The very word 'Islam,' after all, means 'peace.' And suicide is forbidden in the Koran. So there is no scriptural basis whatsoever for the actions of these terrorists." To such magician's patter, we might add that the phrase "dirty bomb" does not appear anywhere in the text of the Koran. Yes, the Koran seems to say something that can be construed as a prohibition against suicide—"Do not destroy yourselves" (4:29)—but it leaves many loopholes large enough to fly a 767 through:

Let those who would exchange the life of this world for the hereafter, fight for the cause of God; whoever fights for the cause of

God, whether he dies or triumphs, We shall richly reward him___
 The true believers fight for the cause of God, but the infidels fight
 for the devil. Fight then against the friends of Satan.... Say: "Tri-
 fling are the pleasures of this life. The hereafter is better for those
 who would keep from evil. . . ." (Koran 4:74-78)

When the above invitations to martyrdom are considered in light of the fact that Islam does not distinguish between religious and civil authority,¹⁵ the twin terrors of Koranic literalism spring into view: on the level of the state, a Muslim aspiration for world domination is explicitly enjoined by God; on the level of the individual, the metaphysics of martyrdom provides a rationale for ultimate self-sacrifice toward this end. As Bernard Lewis observes, since the time of the Prophet, Islam has been "associated in the minds and memories of Muslims with the exercise of political and military power."¹⁶ The metaphysics of Islam are particularly inauspicious where tolerance and religious diversity are concerned, for martyrdom is the only way that a Muslim can bypass the painful litigation that awaits us all on the Day of Judgment and proceed directly to paradise. Rather than spend centuries moldering in the earth in anticipation of being resurrected and subsequently interrogated by wrathful angels, the martyr is immediately transported to Allah's Garden, where a flock of "dark-eyed" virgins awaits him.

Because they are believed to be nothing less than verbatim transcripts of God's utterances, texts like the Koran and the Bible must be appreciated, and criticized, for any *possible* interpretations to which they are susceptible—and to which they will be subjected, with varying emphases and elisions, throughout the religious world. The problem is not that some Muslims neglect to notice the few references to nonaggression that can be found in the Koran, and that this leads them to do terrible things to innocent unbelievers; the problem is that most Muslims believe that the Koran is the *literal word of God*. The corrective to the worldview of Osama bin Laden is not to point out the single line in the Koran that condemns suicide,

because this ambiguous statement is set in a thicket of other passages that can be read only as direct summons to war against the "friends of Satan." The appropriate response to the bin Ladens of the world is to correct everyone's reading of these texts by making the same evidentiary demands in religious matters that we make in all others. If we cannot find our way to a time when most of us are willing to admit that, at the very least, *we are not sure* whether or not God wrote some of our books, then we need only count the days to Armageddon—because God has given us far many more reasons to kill one another than to turn the other cheek.

We live in an age in which most people believe that mere words—"Jesus," "Allah," "Ram"—can mean the difference between eternal torment and bliss everlasting. Considering the stakes here, it is not surprising that many of us occasionally find it necessary to murder other human beings for using the wrong magic words, or the right ones for the wrong reasons. How can any person presume to know that this is the way the universe works? Because it says so in our holy books. How do we know that our holy books are free from error? Because the books *themselves* say so. Epistemological black holes of this sort are fast draining the light from our world.

There is, of course, much that is wise and consoling and beautiful in our religious books. But words of wisdom and consolation and beauty abound in the pages of Shakespeare, Virgil, and Homer as well, and no one ever murdered strangers by the thousands because of the inspiration he found there. The belief that certain books were written by God (who, for reasons difficult to fathom, made Shakespeare a far better writer than himself) leaves us powerless to address the most potent source of human conflict, past and present.¹⁷ How is it that the absurdity of this idea does not bring us, hourly, to our knees? It is safe to say that few of us would have thought so many people could believe such a thing, if they did not *actually* believe it. Imagine a world in which generations of human beings come to believe that certain *films* were made by God or that specific software was coded by him. Imagine a future in which millions of

our descendants murder each other over rival interpretations of *Star Wars* or *Windows 98*. Could anything—*anything*—be more ridiculous? And yet, this would be no more ridiculous than the world we are living in.

Death: The Fount of Illusions

We live in a world where all things, good and bad, are finally destroyed by change. The world sustains us, it would seem, only to devour us at its leisure. Parents lose their children and children their parents. Husbands and wives are separated in an instant, never to meet again. Friends part company in haste, without knowing that it will be for the last time. This life, when surveyed with a broad glance, presents little more than a vast spectacle of loss.

But it seems that there is a cure for all this. If we live rightly—not necessarily ethically, but within the framework of certain ancient beliefs and stereotyped behaviors—we will get everything we want *after* we die. When our bodies finally fail us, we just shed our corporeal ballast and travel to a land where we are reunited with everyone we loved while alive. Of course, overly rational people and other rabble will be kept out of this happy place, and those who suspended their disbelief while alive will be free to enjoy themselves for all eternity.

We live in a world of unimaginable surprises—from the fusion energy that lights the sun to the genetic and evolutionary consequences of this light's dancing for eons upon the earth—and yet paradise conforms to our most superficial concerns with all the fidelity of a Caribbean cruise. This is wondrously strange. If one didn't know better, one would think that man, in his fear of losing all that he loves, had created heaven, along with its gatekeeper God, in his own image.

IMAGINE that you have gone to your doctor for a routine checkup, and he gives you terrible news: you have contracted a virus that kills

100 percent of those it infects. The virus mutates so often that its course is totally unpredictable. It can lie dormant for many years, even decades, or it can kill you outright in an hour. It can lead to heart attack, stroke, myriad forms of cancer, dementia, even suicide; in fact, there seems to be no constraints upon what its terminal stages might be. As for strategies of avoidance—diet and health regimes, sequestration to one's bed—nothing avails. You can be certain that even if you live with no other purpose than to keep the progress of this virus in check, you will die, for there is no cure for it in sight, and the corruption of your body has already begun.

Surely, most people would consider this report to be terrible news indeed—but would it be *news*, in fact? Isn't the inevitability of death just such a prognosis? Doesn't life itself have all the properties of our hypothetical virus?

You could die at any moment. You might not even live to see the end of this paragraph. Not only that, you will *definitely* die at some moment in the future. If being prepared for death entails knowing when and where it will happen, the odds are you will not be prepared. Not only are you bound to die and leave this world; you are bound to leave it in such a precipitate fashion that the present significance of anything—your relationships, your plans for the future, your hobbies, your possessions—will appear to have been totally illusory. While all such things, when projected across an indefinite future, seem to be acquisitions of a kind, death proves that they are nothing of the sort. When the stopper on this life is pulled by an unseen hand, there will have been, in the final reckoning, no acquisition of anything at all.

And as if this were not insult enough, most of us suffer the quiet discomposure, if not frank unhappiness, of our neuroses in the meantime. We love our family and friends, are terrified of losing them, and yet are not in the least free *merely* to love them while our short lives coincide. We have, after all, our *selves* to worry about. As Freud and his descendants never tired of pointing out, each of us is dragged and sundered by diametrical urges: to merge with the world

and disappear, or to retreat within the citadel of our apparent separateness. Either impulse, taken to its extreme, seems to condemn us to unhappiness. We are terrified of our creaturely insignificance, and much of what we do with our lives is a rather transparent attempt to keep this fear at bay. While we try not to think about it, nearly the only thing we can be certain of in this life is that we will one day die and leave everything behind; and yet, paradoxically, it seems almost impossible to believe that this is so. Our felt sense of what is real seems not to include our own death. We doubt the one thing that is not open to any doubt at all.

What one believes happens after death dictates much of what one believes about life, and this is why faith-based religion, in presuming to fill in the blanks in our knowledge of the hereafter, does such heavy lifting for those who fall under its power. A single proposition—*you will not die*—once believed, determines a response to life that would be otherwise unthinkable.

Imagine how you would feel if your only child suddenly died of pneumonia. Your reaction to this tragedy will be largely determined by what you think happens to human beings after they die. It would undoubtedly be comforting to believe something like: "He was God's little angel, and God took him back early because he wanted him close to Jesus. He'll be waiting for us when we get to heaven." If your beliefs are those of a Christian Scientist, obliging you to forgo all medical interventions, you may even have collaborated with God by refusing to give your child antibiotics.

Or consider how you would feel if you learned that a nuclear war had erupted between Israel and its neighbors over the ownership of the Temple Mount. If you were a millennium-minded Christian, you would undoubtedly view this as a sign of Christ's imminent return to earth. This would be nothing if not good news, no matter what the death toll. There's no denying that a person's conception of the afterlife has direct consequences for his view of the world.

Of course, religious moderation consists in not being too sure about what happens after death. This is a reasonable attitude, given

the paucity of evidence on the subject. But religious moderation still represents a failure to criticize the unreasonable (and dangerous) certainty of others. As a consequence of our silence on these matters, we live in a country in which a person cannot get elected president if he openly doubts the existence of heaven and hell. This is truly remarkable, given that there is no other body of "knowledge" that we require our political leaders to master. Even a hairstylist must pass a licensing exam before plying his trade in the United States, and yet those given the power to make war and national policy—those whose decisions will inevitably affect human life for generations—are not expected to know anything in particular before setting to work. They do not have to be political scientists, economists, or even lawyers; they need not have studied international relations, military history, resource management, civil engineering, or any other field of knowledge that might be brought to bear in the governance of a modern superpower; they need only be expert fund-raisers, comport themselves well on television, and be indulgent of certain *myths*. In our next presidential election, an actor who reads his Bible would almost certainly defeat a rocket scientist who does not. Could there be any clearer indication that we are allowing unreason and otherworldliness to govern our affairs?

Without death, the influence of faith-based religion would be unthinkable. Clearly, the fact of death is intolerable to us, and faith is little more than the shadow cast by our hope for a better life beyond the grave.

The World beyond Reason

As we will see in the last chapter of this book, there is little doubt that a certain range of human experience can be appropriately described as "spiritual" or "mystical"—experiences of meaningfulness, selflessness, and heightened emotion that surpass our narrow identities as "selves" and escape our current understanding of the

mind and brain. But nothing about these experiences justifies arrogant and exclusionary claims about the unique sanctity of any text. There is no reason that our ability to sustain ourselves emotionally and spiritually cannot evolve with technology politics, and the rest of culture. Indeed, it *must* evolve, if we are to have any future at all.

The basis of our spirituality surely consists in this: the range of possible human experience far exceeds the ordinary limits of our subjectivity. Clearly, some experiences can utterly transform a person's vision of the world. Every spiritual tradition rests on the insight that how we use our attention, from moment to moment, largely determines the quality of our lives. Many of the results of spiritual practice are genuinely desirable, and we owe it to ourselves to seek them out. It is important to note that these changes are not merely emotional but cognitive and conceptual as well. Just as it is possible for us to have insights in fields like mathematics or biology, it is possible for us to have insights about the very nature of our own subjectivity. A variety of techniques, ranging from the practice of meditation to the use of psychedelic drugs, attest to the scope and plasticity of human experience. For millennia, contemplatives have known that ordinary people can divest themselves of the feeling that they call "I" and thereby relinquish the sense that they are separate from the rest of the universe. This phenomenon, which has been reported by practitioners in many spiritual traditions, is supported by a wealth of evidence—neuroscientific, philosophical, and introspective. Such experiences are "spiritual" or "mystical," for want of better words, in that they are relatively rare (unnecessarily so), significant (in that they uncover genuine facts about the world), and personally transformative. They also reveal a far deeper connection between ourselves and the rest of the universe than is suggested by the ordinary confines of our subjectivity. There is no doubt that experiences of this sort are worth seeking, just as there is no doubt that the popular religious ideas that have grown up around them, especially in the West, are as dangerous as they are incredible. A truly rational approach to this dimension of our lives would allow us

to explore the heights of our subjectivity with an open mind, while shedding the provincialism and dogmatism of our religious traditions in favor of free and rigorous inquiry.

There also seems to be a body of data attesting to the reality of psychic phenomena, much of which has been ignored by mainstream science.¹⁸ The dictum that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence" remains a reasonable guide in these areas, but this does not mean that the universe isn't far stranger than many of us suppose. It is important to realize that a healthy, scientific skepticism is compatible with a fundamental openness of mind.

The claims of mystics are neurologically quite astute. No human being has ever experienced an objective world, or even a *world* at all. You are, at this moment, having a visionary experience. The world that you see and hear is nothing more than a modification of your consciousness, the physical status of which remains a mystery. Your nervous system sections the undifferentiated buzz of the universe into separate channels of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch, as well as other senses of lesser renown—proprioception, kinesthesia, enteroreception, and even echolocation.¹⁹ The sights and sounds and pulsings that you experience at this moment are like different spectra of light thrown forth by the prism of the brain. We really are such stuff as dreams are made of. Our waking and dreaming brains are engaged in substantially the same activity; it is just that while dreaming, our brains are far less constrained by sensory information or by the fact-checkers who appear to live somewhere in our frontal lobes. This is not to say that sensory experience offers us no indication of reality at large; it is merely that, as a matter of experience, nothing arises in consciousness that has not first been structured, edited, or amplified by the nervous system. While this gives rise to a few philosophical problems concerning the foundations of our knowledge, it also offers us a remarkable opportunity to deliberately transform the character of our experience.

For every neuron that receives its input from the outside world, there are ten to a hundred others that do not. The brain is therefore

talking mostly to itself, and no information from the world (with the exception of olfaction) runs directly from a sensory receptor to the cortex, where the contents of consciousness appear to be sequestered. There are always one or two breaks in the circuit—*synapses*—giving the neurons in question the opportunity to integrate feedback information, or information from other regions of the brain. This sort of integration/contamination of signal explains how certain drugs, emotional states, or even conceptual insights can radically alter the character of our experience. Your brain is tuned to deliver the vision of the world that you are having at this moment. At the heart of most spiritual traditions lurks the entirely valid claim that it can be tuned differently.

It is also true, however, that people occasionally have experiences that are rightly characterized as psychotic. As it turns out, there are many ways to deconstruct a self, to extract (apparent) meaningfulness from the deliverances of one's senses, and to believe that one knows how the world is. Not all visionary experiences are created equal, to say nothing of the worldviews derived from them. As in all things, some differences here make all the difference; these differences, moreover, can be rationally discussed.

As we will see, there is an intimate connection between spirituality, ethics, and positive emotions. Although a scientific approach to these subjects is still struggling to be born, it is probably no more mysterious that most of us prefer love to fear, or regard cruelty as wrong, than that we agree in our judgments about the relative size of objects or about the gender of faces. At the level of the brain, the laws that underwrite human happiness are unlikely to vary widely from person to person. In the later chapters of this book, we will see that much can be made of this fact, long before the scientific details ever become available to us.

ONCE we have examined the problems inherent to faith, and the threat that even "moderate" religious faith, however inadvertently,

now poses to our survival, we can begin to situate our ethical intuitions and our capacity for spiritual experience within the context of a rational worldview. This will require that we marshal insights from our growing understanding of the human brain, our genetic continuity with the rest of life, and the history of our religious ideas. In the chapters that follow, I will try to reconcile the bewildering juxtaposition of two facts: (1) our religious traditions attest to a range of spiritual experiences that are real and significant and entirely worthy of our investigation, both personally and scientifically; (2) many of the beliefs that have grown up around these experiences now threaten to destroy us.

We cannot live by reason alone. This is why no quantity of reason, applied as antiseptic, can compete with the balm of faith, once the terrors of this world begin to intrude upon our lives.²⁰ Your child has died, or your wife has acquired a horrible illness that no doctor can cure, or your own body has suddenly begun striding toward the grave—and reason, no matter how broad its compass, will begin to smell distinctly of formaldehyde. This has led many of us to conclude, wrongly, that human beings have needs that only faith in certain fantastical ideas can fulfill. It is nowhere written, however, that human beings must be irrational, or live in a perpetual state of siege, to enjoy an abiding sense of the sacred. On the contrary, I hope to show that spirituality can be—indeed, *must* be—deeply rational, even as it elucidates the limits of reason. Seeing this, we can begin to divest ourselves of many of the reasons we currently have to kill one another.

Science will not remain mute on spiritual and ethical questions for long. Even now, we can see the first stirrings among psychologists and neuroscientists of what may one day become a genuinely rational approach to these matters—one that will bring even the most rarefied mystical experience within the purview of open, scientific inquiry. It is time we realized that we need not be unreasonable to suffuse our lives with love, compassion, ecstasy, and awe; nor must we renounce all forms of spirituality or mysticism to be on good terms with reason.

In the chapters that follow, I will attempt to make both the conceptual and the experiential bases for these claims explicit.

Coming to Terms with Belief

It is time we recognized that belief is not a private matter; it has never been merely private. In fact, beliefs are scarcely more private than actions are, for every belief is a fount of action *in potentia*. The belief that it will rain puts an umbrella in the hand of every man or woman who owns one. It should be easy enough to see that belief in the full efficacy of prayer, for instance, becomes an emphatically *public* concern the moment it is actually put into practice: the moment a surgeon lays aside his worldly instruments and attempts to suture his patients with prayer, or a pilot tries to land a passenger jet with nothing but repetitions of the word "Hallelujah" applied to the controls, we are swiftly delivered from the provinces of private faith to those of a criminal court.

As a man believes, so he will act. Believe that you are the member of a chosen people, awash in the salacious exports of an evil culture that is turning your children away from God, believe that you will be rewarded with an eternity of unimaginable delights by dealing death to these infidels—and flying a plane into a building is scarcely more than a matter of being asked to do it. It follows, then, that certain beliefs are *intrinsically* dangerous. We all know that human beings are capable of incredible brutality, but we would do well to ask, What sort of ideology will make us *most* capable of it? And how can we place these beliefs beyond the fray of normal discourse, so that they might endure for thousands of years, unperturbed by the course of history or the conquests of reason? These are problems of both cultural and psychological engineering. It has long been obvious that the dogma of faith—particularly in a scheme in which the faithful are promised eternal salvation and doubters are damned—is nothing less than their perfect solution.

It is time we admitted, from kings and presidents on down, that there is no evidence that any of our books was authored by the Creator of the universe. The Bible, it seems certain, was the work of sand-strewn men and women who thought the earth was flat and for whom a wheelbarrow would have been a breathtaking example of emerging technology. To rely on such a document as the basis for our worldview—however heroic the efforts of redactors—is to repudiate two thousand years of civilizing insights that the human mind has only just begun to inscribe upon itself through secular politics and scientific culture. We will see that the greatest problem confronting civilization is not merely religious extremism: rather, it is the larger set of cultural and intellectual accommodations we have made to faith itself. Religious moderates are, in large part, responsible for the religious conflict in our world, because their beliefs provide the context in which scriptural literalism and religious violence can never be adequately opposed.

EVERY sphere of genuine discourse must, at a minimum, admit of *discourse*—and hence the possibility that those standing on its fringe can come to understand the truths that it strives to articulate. This is why any sustained exercise of reason must necessarily transcend national, religious, and ethnic boundaries. There is, after all, no such thing as an inherently American (or Christian, or Caucasian) *physics*.²¹ Even spirituality and ethics meet this criterion of universality because human beings, whatever their background, seem to converge on similar spiritual experiences and ethical insights when given the same methods of inquiry. Such is not the case with the "truths" of religion, however. Nothing that a Christian and a Muslim can say to each other will render their beliefs mutually vulnerable to discourse, because the very tenets of their faith have immunized them against the power of conversation. Believing strongly, without evidence, they have kicked themselves loose of the world. It is therefore in the very nature of faith to serve as an imped-

iment to further inquiry. And yet, the fact that we are no longer killing people for heresy in the West suggests that bad ideas, however sacred, cannot survive the company of good ones forever.

Given the link between belief and action, it is clear that we can no more tolerate a diversity of religious beliefs than a diversity of beliefs about epidemiology and basic hygiene. There are still a number of cultures in which the germ theory of disease has yet to put in an appearance, where people suffer from a debilitating ignorance on most matters relevant to their physical health. Do we "tolerate" these beliefs? Not if they put our own health in jeopardy.²²

Even apparently innocuous beliefs, when unjustified, can lead to intolerable consequences. Many Muslims, for instance, are convinced that God takes an active interest in women's clothing. While it may seem harmless enough, the amount of suffering that this incredible idea has caused is astonishing. The rioting in Nigeria over the 2002 Miss World Pageant claimed over two hundred lives; innocent men and women were butchered with machetes or burned alive simply to keep that troubled place free of women in bikinis. Earlier in the year, the religious police in Mecca prevented paramedics and firefighters from rescuing scores of teenage girls trapped in a burning building.²³ Why? Because the girls were not wearing the traditional head covering that Koranic law requires. Fourteen girls died in the fire; fifty were injured. Should Muslims really be free to believe that the Creator of the universe is concerned about hemlines?

Gathering Our Wits

Recent events have done more than expose our vulnerability to the militant discontents of the world: they have uncovered a dark current of unreason in our national discourse. To see how much our culture currently partakes of the irrationality of our enemies, just substitute the name of your favorite Olympian for "God" wherever this word appears in public discourse. Imagine President Bush

addressing the National Prayer Breakfast in these terms: "Behind all of life and all history there is a dedication and a purpose, set by the hand of a just and faithful *Zeus*." Imagine his speech to Congress (September 20, 2001) containing the sentence "Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty have always been at war, and we know that *Apollo* is not neutral between them." Clearly, the commonplaces of language conceal the vacuity and strangeness of many of our beliefs. Our president regularly speaks in phrases appropriate to the fourteenth century, and no one seems inclined to find out what words like "God" and "crusade" and "wonder-working power" mean to him. Not only do we still eat the offal of the ancient world; we are positively smug about it. Garry Wills has noted that the Bush White House "is currently honeycombed with prayer groups and Bible study cells, like a whited monastery."²⁴ This should trouble us as much as it troubles the fanatics of the Muslim world. We should be humbled, perhaps to the point of spontaneous genuflection, by the knowledge that the ancient Greeks began to lay their Olympian myths to rest several hundred years before the birth of Christ, whereas we have the likes of Bill Moyers convening earnest gatherings of scholars for the high purpose of determining just how the book of Genesis can be reconciled with life in the modern world. As we stride boldly into the Middle Ages, it does not seem out of place to wonder whether the myths that now saturate our discourse will wind up killing many of us, as the myths of others already have.

Two hundred years from now, when we are a thriving global civilization beginning to colonize space, *something* about us will have changed: it must have; otherwise, we would have killed ourselves ten times over before this day ever dawned. We are fast approaching a time when the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction will be a trivial undertaking; the requisite information and technology are now seeping into every corner of our world. As the physicist Martin Rees points out, "We are entering an era where a single person can, by one clandestine act, cause millions of deaths or render a city uninhabitable for years. . . ." ²⁵ Given the power of our technology,

we can see at a glance that aspiring martyrs will not make good neighbors in the future. We have simply lost the right to our myths, and to our mythic identities.

It is time we recognized that the only thing that permits human beings to collaborate with one another in a truly open-ended way is their willingness to have their beliefs modified by new facts. Only openness to evidence and argument will secure a common world for us. Nothing guarantees that reasonable people will agree about everything, of course, but the unreasonable are certain to be divided by their dogmas. This spirit of mutual inquiry is the very antithesis of religious faith.

While we may never achieve closure in our view of the world, it seems extraordinarily likely that our descendants will look upon many of our beliefs as both impossibly quaint and suicidally stupid. Our primary task in our discourse with one another should be to identify those beliefs that seem least likely to survive another thousand years of human inquiry, or most likely to prevent it, and subject them to sustained criticism. Which of our present practices will appear most ridiculous from the point of view of those future generations that might yet survive the folly of the present? It is hard to imagine that our religious preoccupations will not top the list.²⁶ It is natural to hope that our descendants will look upon us with gratitude. But we should also hope that they look upon us with pity and disgust, just as we view the slaveholders of our all-too-recent past. Rather than congratulate ourselves for the state of our civilization, we should consider how, in the fullness of time, we will seem hopelessly backward, and work to lay a foundation for such refinements in the present. We must find our way to a time when faith, without evidence, disgraces anyone who would claim it. Given the present state of our world, there appears to be no other future worth wanting.

It is imperative that we begin speaking plainly about the absurdity of most of our religious beliefs. I fear, however, that the time has not yet arrived. In this sense, what follows is written very much in

the spirit of a prayer. I pray that we may one day think clearly enough about these matters to render our children incapable of killing themselves over their books. If not our children, then I suspect it could well be too late for us, because while it has never been difficult to meet your maker, in fifty years it will simply be too easy to drag everyone else along to meet him with you.²⁷