

The
Evolution–Creation
Struggle



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I

Christianity and Its Discontents

When I survey the wondrous Cross
on which the Prince of Glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the cross of Christ my God:
all the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

*M*uch Protestant theology is packed into the beginning lines of this beloved hymn, published in 1707 by the English Congregationalist minister Isaac Watts. The focus is on Jesus, who freely accepts sacrifice on the Cross for our sakes, out of pure love. We are sinners, and he has put himself in the way of our deserved punishment, in an act of substitutionary atonement. The hymn stresses our insignificance, our worthlessness beside our lord, and the futility of believing that we can do anything, save through him. Yet, through the unmerited grace of God we have the possibility of eternal salvation—if, and only if, we approach him through faith and commit our lives to Christ. In its concluding lines the hymn stresses our obligation:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
that were a present far too small;
love so amazing, so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.

The debt of grace must be paid, but it can be paid only in the currency of unerring, total faith and commitment. This exchange—at the very root of Christian salvation—is a crucial insight into the religious mind that we must hold onto throughout this book.¹

To begin our story, let us go back nearly two thousand years in time and travel to one of the colonies on the outskirts of the Roman Empire. One doubts that Jesus saw himself as the founder of a world religion. On that bitter Friday afternoon when he was taken down from the Cross, there was no belief system that could be called Christianity. Nor on the Sunday following or in the weeks after, when he visited with his disciples before he left them for the last time on this earth. No dogma, no set of rules for everyday living, no structure, no organizers, no nothing. It fell to the followers, Peter especially and then above all the Apostle Paul, to begin the job of building a religion that could function and endure and give meaning to the lives of Christ's followers. And this task continued for several centuries as the theologians and thinkers (the Church fathers) fleshed out the meaning of Christ's coming—his life, his teachings, and his death—and put it all together in a coherent system.²

One of the most pressing problems for those early Christians was their relationship to the Jews. Jesus and his immediate followers, not to mention Paul, were all Jews, and their thinking developed within that context. But Christianity became a religion of people who were not Jewish—people whom the Jews called gentiles. Most Jews rejected the Christian faith. What then should be the attitude of the new Church toward the sacred writings of the Jews? The books of the

New Testament, written by the Apostles themselves or their close disciples in the first hundred years after Christ's birth, became part of the Christian canon after a period of sifting and sorting by the Church fathers. But what about the books of the Hebrew Bible that Christians now call the Old Testament? Were these to be binding upon or relevant to Christians? Some sects, the Manicheans, for instance, thought not and rejected them.

But there were good reasons why Christians should take in the Old Testament, quite apart from the historical context into which Jesus' life and death were set. With the stories of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) particularly, one could start to make full sense of Jesus' appearance on earth and explain why his dying on the Cross was relevant to the fate of humans. The story of Adam and Eve showed that we are all tainted by original sin, and hence the Redeemer had to die to save us not just from our sinful actions but from our sinful natures. Only through his sacrifice, the necessity of which was made clear in Genesis, could we hope for eternal life.

But the Old Testament offered something more: a historical perspective on the entire world and its living inhabitants, particularly its human inhabitants. It told a story of origins, how the universe was created and began, with a focus on the absolutely central role of humans in the past, present, and hoped-for future of the world. In the Old Testament narrative we have something dramatically new. The Greeks, the great thinkers of the ancient world, left a metaphysics of eternal existence. Change occurred down here on earth, but the universe as a whole essentially had always been here and enjoyed the prospect of an infinite—if not necessarily human-centered—future. The god of the great Greek philosopher Aristotle spent his time forever contemplating his own perfection and was indifferent to the fate of the inhabitants of our globe. The Christian world picture, by con-

trast, was one of beginnings, of growth and development. A picture where we humans were the main event.

But why not some kind of evolutionary picture? Why not a world in which organisms grew from minute points, slowly over time? There were two major reasons. First, early Christians already had the story of Genesis, which told of God's miraculous creation of the living world in six days. One can read this tale in many ways, but an evolutionary reading does not come first to mind. This does not mean that the early Christians were creationists in a modern American sense. They accepted the stories of Genesis as the correct account, but primarily because they could see no reasons to do otherwise.

When he was young, Saint Augustine, the greatest of all of the early theologians, had been a Manichean. He knew all of the problems with the Old Testament (the conflicts between the two different creation stories in the first two chapters of Genesis, for instance), and he warned that the very last thing Christianity needed was slavish adherence to the letter of Mosaic text. He stressed that those early stories were written for primitive, nomadic peoples, not for sophisticated citizens of the Roman Empire. If one has reason, scientific reason, to reject a literal reading of the Bible and to accept a metaphorical interpretation, then so be it. As it happens, no one at that time thought that such reason existed, but the possibility was there.³

A religion based on faith in the unseen, particularly on the belief that the Bible is the divinely inspired word of God, is known as "revealed religion." But thinking people in Saint Augustine's time did not have to resort to revealed religion to justify their faith in creation. Natural religion—religion based on observations of design in the world around them, particularly in organisms—also preempted any kind of protoevolutionary thinking. As early Christians articulated and developed their faith, they drew on a legacy handed down from the Greeks which rejected organic developmentalism.⁴ Both Plato and

Aristotle had noted that living things seem put together for specific ends, namely, the good of the organisms themselves. To understand how that came about, one must go beyond proximate, or nearby, causes and appeal to “final,” or teleological, causes.

Granted, there were a few pre-Socratics who supposed that a kind of protoevolution took place. Empedocles and the atomists thought that pieces of body cohered by chance and eventually became fully functioning organisms. But the greatest Greek philosophers and their followers, including the physician Galen, thought this a false philosophy. Not even infinite space and time would yield complete functioning organisms. One must suppose some principle of ordering, some kind of intelligence at work in creating life. The organic world had a designer—it could not have come about through blind adherence to physical laws. Such was the legacy of the Greeks, and the Christian world bought into it completely.

If the Old Testament provided a story of origins that fit the worldview of early Christians, the New Testament offered a glimpse of the future—eternal salvation for sheep and eternal damnation for goats. Jesus’ lifespan came at a time when the Jews were much oppressed by their Roman overlords. Trying to make sense of such trials for a people who thought of themselves as being favored of God, many turned to apocalyptic writings and dreams which envisaged future battles between the forces of good and evil, with the former eventually triumphing.⁵ The Old Testament book of Daniel is just such a work of this kind. Not only was Jesus himself influenced by such fantasies, but after his death his followers continued in this pattern. Most influential was the apocalyptic dream of John (not to be confused with the Apostle who wrote the Gospel of St. John), whose Revelation spoke of future travails and clashes. A monstrous battle, Armageddon, would be succeeded by a thousand-year period—the millennium—when Jesus would rule on earth. More conflict would follow,

and then good would triumph during the Last Judgment. To early Christians, even more persecuted than Jews, tales like this gave great comfort and meaning to an otherwise dreadful existence.

But as the centuries rolled by and as Christianity rose in power and popularity, people felt less need for apocalyptic predictions. Saint Augustine, in particular, although not excluding Revelation from the canon, dealt with such stories in a highly metaphorical fashion. We should not think of the millennium as an actual time to come, he said, but as an event already arrived with the incarnation of Christ himself. He urged those who spent time trying to calculate the date of the end of the world to “relax your fingers and give them a rest.” And this set the pattern for centuries. Toward the end of the twelfth century the Cistercian monk Joachim of Flora revived a more literal interpretation, with a three-part, upwardly rising interpretation of history, from the Age of the Father, through the Age of the Son, to the future Age of the Spirit. But Aquinas and others had little time for this thinking, and through the medieval period a more static and stable world picture prevailed.⁶

The Crisis of Faith

The Reformation was and was not *the* major crisis in the history of Western Christianity. It broke the power of Rome, by dividing Christians into Catholics and Protestants, but it did not at once lead to unbelief. Indeed, in their own way, early Protestants were even more ardent in their commitments than were Catholics, especially in their emphasis on the significance of the Bible in reenforcing each person's faith. Among Catholics, faith was expressed through adherence to the tradition and authority of the Church, rather than through reading and following the letter of the Scriptures. Protestants, by contrast, often consciously reached back to the theologies of the early Church fa-

thers for the precepts of their faith. Sin, sacrifice, substitution, salvation—these Reformation ideas were taken right out of Augustine. Even some of the grimmer and odder views of the reformers—for instance, John Calvin's endorsement of predestination, which held that God alone chooses who shall be saved and who condemned—had early Christian roots. But the Reformation did have repercussions and implications that slowly began to undermine the very foundations of Christianity. People began to entertain the appalling possibility that all religious teaching might not be true, that religion itself might be false. Why did this worry, this doubt, start to appear?

After the initial burst of enthusiasm for Church reform in the sixteenth century, the implications of religious differences started to sink in. Is God a Catholic? If not, then he must be a Protestant. But if so, what kind of Protestant—Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican, or some other? What if he is none of the above? By the end of the seventeenth century, people were becoming aware of other civilizations. Why should these folk be regarded as mere savages—"pore benighted 'eathen," as Rudyard Kipling would later put it sardonically? These peoples had religions totally alien to Christianity. Growing familiarity with India—a country with a sophisticated and venerable religious heritage—caused a major cultural disjuncture. What should one make of these people? Could one perhaps find some stripped-down religious core that included their beliefs along with Christianity, and indeed with Judaism, Islam, and other great religions? With the building of empires, the question of religious tolerance became a pressing practical matter, for the British particularly were disinclined to push their own religious views on other cultures. Such practices would only foment discontent with the masses and would most certainly be bad for trade.

Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, who even in the first half of the seventeenth century was worrying about the diverse claims made

in the name of the Lord, posed this theoretical question: "What shall the layman, encompassed by the terrors of diverse churches militant throughout the world, decide as to the best religion? For there is no church that does not breathe threats, none almost that does not deny the possibility of salvation outside its own pale."⁷ Destined to become known as the father of English deism, Herbert worked toward the idea of a religion that postulated a God and a need to worship him and the obligation to be moral, but little more. As deism developed, increasingly it severed its Christian roots and became a belief in an Unmoved Mover, who designed and set the universe in motion and then stood back as his handiwork operated through unbroken physical law.

Deism fit well with the growing triumphs of science, which in the sixteenth century were starting to pressure the authority of the old traditions. One could certainly be a Christian and a Copernican, but only the naive could pretend that no shock occurred. What did a Copernican make of the claims in the Old Testament that the sun stopped for Joshua, for instance? Far worse was the way heliocentrism displaced and downplayed the significance of the earth in the overall scheme of things. No longer were we humans at the center of things, but off to one side, revolving around something bigger and brighter. And the phenomenon of stellar parallax, or rather of its absence—that is, the failure of stars to show displacement as the earth moved through the heavens—meant that the universe, with its myriad stars, had to be simply huge. Back in the tenth century, the Arabs had worked out that the universe was about 98 million miles across. Thanks to Copernicus, it appeared that, at a minimum, the universe was 400,000 times bigger than this. The idea of an infinite universe, with millions of massive stars equivalent to our sun, was not far off, and what intellectual price would a Christian have to pay then to maintain the unique status of our globe? Suddenly all of those Gene-

sis stories about fashioning humans from dust in the image of God started to seem more a function of ignorance than of reason.⁸

The philosophers of the seventeenth century were not helping greatly either. Thomas Hobbes suggested that the natural state of humanity is full of conflict and strife (“brutish and short”), with no need to invoke original sin to explain our predicament. John Locke proved to the satisfaction of many that there are no innate ideas, citing as evidence all the tales about diverse moral and social practices around the globe. Above all, there was René Descartes, who may have remained a good Catholic but who certainly gave food for thought to more than just Catholics through his skeptical philosophy. In the *Meditations*, he introduced his method of systematic doubt, which undercut not only the evidences of the senses but even the existence of a benevolent god. Could it not be that some all-powerful, evil demon is playing with me and deceiving me at the highest or deepest levels, he asked? Descartes himself claimed to rescue the situation with his discovery of an indubitable premise, *Cogito ergo sum*—I think, therefore I am—but many were unconvinced that, having dug himself into a hole, he was now clever enough to escape.⁹

With these philosophical influences came, at first slowly, a willingness to look at religion in the light of reason, and especially to look at the sacred writings as if they were human-produced rather than simply transcriptions of divine dictation. And what this practice—later to be known as “higher criticism”—showed was that major problems of scholarship had to be tackled before one could attempt a fruitful reading of the Bible. The book was a very human document with many authors, and not all of them consistent one with another.

Along with revealed religion, natural theology was also under pressure. If the world is such a wonderful example of design, why do we have so much misery and pain? The philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz had responded that even God cannot go against necessity, and

that although (being all-good) he created the best of all possible worlds, this did not mean he could eliminate creation's downside. Fire burns, and the result can be a good thing; but fire can also kill, and that is a bad thing. On balance, however, better to have fire than not. This kind of argument was parodied by the French writer Voltaire in *Candide*, where he invented the Leibnizian philosopher Dr. Pangloss. Whenever anything goes wrong—and much does—Pangloss sees it as the “best of all possible things in the best of all possible worlds.” A laughably ludicrous conclusion—then as now, humor trumped any amount of serious philosophical argument.

Gradually at first but with increasing speed, new technologies brought social and cultural changes to Europe, especially to Britain, that undermined religious certainty. As people started to leave the countryside and take jobs in towns and cities, the hierarchical and settled state of a rural, farming society started to change, and with it the dominant religious ideologies. Thanking God at the harvest festival made little sense to a factory worker in Manchester or a collier in Durham. One's foreman and the boss were bigger and more immediate authority figures than the squire and the parson. To many, what may have worked in the past no longer seemed relevant to the present, and even less so to the future.¹⁰

Not all of these changes came at once or together. And deism, while it is not Christian, is not atheism, nor is it necessarily the first step on the road to atheism. But the changes were starting to corrode the old confidence—shared by Catholics and Protestants alike—that God created heaven and earth, that he sent his son to die for our sins because he loves us, that he interferes miraculously in his creation, and that we must submit to his will.

What was to be done? Some—in the manner of King Canute—tried to hold back the tide. They refurbished revealed religion, and they polished up natural religion. This was very much the mode of

the established Church of England, which had a long tradition of trying to stay afloat by giving a little and resisting a little more. Its American branch—known as the Episcopal Church—would do likewise. At the end of the eighteenth century, drawing on two hundred years of theological argumentation in his *Evidences of Christianity* (1794), Archdeacon William Paley had staked his case for the authenticity of the Gospels on the willingness of the disciples to suffer death for their faith in the divine nature of Jesus. In 1802 he switched his emphasis away from revealed theology, arguing in his *Natural Theology* that modern science and reason likewise confirm the existence of the Christian deity. Famous even today is Paley's argument that, as the telescope has a telescope maker, so likewise the eye has an eye maker—the great optician in the sky. But for many this kind of argumentation no longer convinced, or at least it no longer convinced just on its own. They wanted something more or something different. Two major responses, at different ends of the spectrum, stand out.

The first reaction to the eighteenth century's crisis of faith was simply to opt out of the conflict. In this view, reason and evidence, made supreme, are tools of the devil, and on the really crucial issues they are deceptive. The way to God is through an open and loving heart, through emotional commitment, not rational choice—that is, through faith and conversion. Thus, the Protestantism of the Reformation gave way to evangelicalism, which acknowledged God as the lord and master who gave his life freely on the Cross for our sins and who now demands of us obedience to his word. The God of evangelicalism is the engaged God of the theist, not the noninterfering god of the deist. He is the God who not only created heaven and earth but manipulates his creation as needed, and without whom his creatures, down to the smallest sparrow, are absolutely helpless.

Most famous and important of the eighteenth-century evangelists were the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, the somewhat inadver-

tent founders of Methodism. In 1738, at Pentecost, John, an Anglican clergyman and graduate of Oxford University, underwent a profound religious experience: “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”¹¹

This set the pattern for a major shift toward emotional and heart-stirring preaching and singing—particularly in the open air and particularly among those excluded from the upper levels of the social order. Not by chance did Charles Wesley become one of the greatest hymn writers of all time. To be saved (converted), one had to confess one’s sins and accept the freely given grace of Jesus Christ. Efforts to earn salvation counted for naught, a sentiment at the heart of the oft-sung hymn, “Rock of Ages,” written by Augustus Montague Toplady in 1776:

Not the labor of my hands
 Can fulfill Thy law’s demands;
 Could my zeal no respite know,
 Could my tears forever flow,
 All for sin could not atone;
 Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Still, Methodism broke from the strict Calvinist doctrine where salvation came purely by the grace of God and was predestined. It moved instead toward a position known as Arminianism, where the willingness of the individual to make a leap of faith determined whether he would be saved. After conversion, to demonstrate his faith, a convert was expected to evangelize among others and also to perform good works—an outward sign of an inward state of grace, but not the price of admission to heaven, which Jesus had paid on the Cross.

Although the Wesleys and some of the other Methodist leaders, being educated men, were by no means averse to science and manufacturing—indeed their Gospel went down well in the industrial north of England—they emphasized a simple faith, backed by diligent reading of the Bible. Even some women became preachers, although, as George Eliot noted wryly in *Adam Bede*, not everyone was happy with this development. By the end of the eighteenth century, 70,000 people in Britain identified themselves as Methodists. And this does not count the evangelicals who belonged to other denominations or remained in the “low church” wing of Anglicanism.

America

Then and now, religion was a bigger factor in daily life and thought in North America than in England.¹² The British colonies had been founded by people in whom religious beliefs and yearnings ran deep. In the stress and strain of carving out a new life in a new world, religion continued to sustain what they saw as a divine mission. This mandate was reinforced by the first Great Awakening, a communicable conversion experience that raced through the colonies, bringing thousands to a sense of their personal sin, their need for repentance, and their obligation to spread the Good News. Between 1739 and 1742 the flames of revival were fanned by the preaching tour of the itinerant English Methodist preacher George Whitefield.

Going back as far as the colonists' escape from Britain in the early seventeenth century, the dominant American theology, especially in New England, had been more strictly Calvinist than middle-of-the-road Anglican. From a Calvinist perspective, an angry God made the decision about who would be saved, and sinners themselves could do nothing to earn salvation. As the eighteenth century took its course, Calvinism was moderated and the individual's response to God's offer

of salvation was acknowledged as critical. By the end of the century there were almost as many Methodists in the New World (60,000) as in the Old.¹³

Nowhere was the evangelical mind of Americans better revealed than in the thinking of the greatest religious genius of his age, the New England pastor Jonathan Edwards.¹⁴ Although theologically he was a very old-fashioned Calvinist indeed, Edwards encouraged the Awakening and was at the forefront of those who saw the significance of a one-on-one encounter with God at the moment of conversion, without need or possibility of rational argument. The title of one of Edwards's well-known sermons, "A divine and supernatural light, immediately imparted to the soul by the spirit of God, shown to be both scriptural and rational doctrine" (1734), stresses the fact that real contact with the deity consists of emotion and faith rather than reason. Edwards insisted that faith in Jesus Christ as the son of God does not come through our minds or senses, in the way that scientific knowledge is obtained. "He [God] imparts this knowledge immediately, not making use of any intermediate natural causes, as he does with other knowledge." Edwards used an analogy:

It is out of reason's province to perceive the beauty or loveliness of any thing; such a perception does not belong to that faculty. Reason's work is to perceive truth and not excellency. It is not ratiocination that gives men the perception of the beauty and amiableness of a countenance, though it may be many ways indirectly an advantage to it; yet it is no more reason that immediately perceives it, than it is reason that perceives the sweetness of honey: it depends on the sense of the heart.—Reason may determine that a countenance is beautiful to others, it may determine that honey is sweet to others; but it will never give me a perception of its sweetness.

So with our apprehension of God, his son, our fallen nature, and his infinite love and grace toward us.

But Edwards did not leave things there. Edwards, like all other Protestant Christians of his age, demanded that religious experience be confirmed by the Scripture. And so he quoted appropriate passages of the New Testament. “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). Edwards and his fellow Christians were biblical literalists insofar as they believed in divine creation, but they were not, in any recognizably twentieth-century sense, creationists. They certainly read the Bible as the true Word of God, but they recognized that all reading, especially of a divinely inspired text, demands interpretation, and eighteenth-century believers were as much given to exegesis as those of any other age.

Interpretation became inextricably linked with millennial thinking among Protestants. At first the reformers were no more enthusiastic about apocalyptic speculations than were philosophers of the Catholic Church. But partly because Protestants put so much emphasis on the significance of the Bible and partly because the break with Rome brought conflict and persecution, apocalyptic thinking revived during the Reformation. Luther himself was a cameo for this development. At first the Book of Revelation had no place in his Christ-centered theology, but later he started to speculate as fancifully as any early Christian. And with such speculation came interpretation. Lined up against the forces of good in Revelation was an array of monsters and devils—Satan, the Antichrist, serpents and many-headed dragons, the Whore of Babylon, the fearsome Gog from the land of Magog, and more. Few if any took these beasts literally but rather spent many happy hours trying to identify their true identities: is the Antichrist the Catholic Church and the Whore of Babylon the Pope, or is the

Pope himself the Antichrist? One persistent line of thought saw the real threat of the latter days as coming from farther east—from Arab and Muslim lands.

Such millennial speculations found a ready home in the English-speaking world, first among Elizabethans, who felt threatened by Catholic Europe, and then, in the seventeenth century, among the embattled Calvinists, who wanted a sterner, less tolerant religion than the Anglican Church. Apocalyptic thinking made a natural transition to the New World with the Pilgrims and other religiously persecuted emigrants, as the most sober of thinkers tried to tie in the dreams of Revelation with the harsh realities of life in America. The influential New England divine Cotton Mather was forever speculating on the date of the end of time. Disappointed by 1697, he pushed the time forward to 1716, and when that failed he moved dates onward yet again.

Jonathan Edwards fit comfortably into this tradition, spending much time on the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, trying to interpret current events, such as various battles between the English and French, in the light of past predictions, and very naturally using metaphor and analogy as needed. For instance, Revelation talks of a great hail falling from heaven, “every stone about the weight of a talent.” Edwards did not take this literally but rather as a sign of the “strong reasons and forcible arguments and demonstrations” that will batter to pieces “the Kingdom of the anti-Christ,” that is popery, “as if they were dashed to pieces by stones from heaven.”¹⁵

Progress

Edwards did not exclude reason from every significant role in Christianity. Reason may not have been all-important, it may have played no part in the greatest insights that we humans receive, but it too was

a gift from God, he believed, and had a place on the human stage. As the title of his 1743 sermon made clear, the “divine and supernatural light” of salvation must be supported by “rational doctrine.” Edwards spent a considerable portion of his sermon explaining why it is reasonable to expect God to speak directly to us. As the analogy with sweetness underlined, the apprehension of God and his divine messages is simply not the sort of thing that human reason could handle—and reason alone convinces us of that. “It is therefore congruous and fit, that when it is given of God, it should be nextly from himself, according to his own sovereign will.” As the Wesleys had preached in Britain, the evangelical response did not reject reason—or the modern science of the day, for that matter—but rather construed the essential connection with God as being beyond the reach of reason.

But what of those at the other end of the spectrum, who wanted to give reason a more central, up-front role in religious life? Their response to the crisis of faith centered on the notion of progress, the idea that humans are gradually improving their lot, socially, intellectually, morally.¹⁶ They started with the assumption that early societies were simple and savage and that through time humankind had progressed, leading to the civilized, functioning nations of the present day (at least in the West). And great though the advances had already been, the future promised to be even brighter, as human civilizations climbed upward toward the light. Where progress distinguished itself from other thought systems was in stressing that advance comes through human effort—we make the difference and we are responsible for change, especially change for the better. Progress could become a plausible idea only after the Scientific Revolution, whose great advances and insights convinced many people that we humans could now foresee the future and control our own fate.

It would be easy to conclude that progress was at sharp odds with Christianity, and this seems true for a Christianity that put all hopes

of a better state entirely within the hands of Providence. Such was the position of Saint Augustine, who saw as many evil things being created by humans as good things and who therefore concluded that on this earth we will always have a battle or balance between the sin of humankind and the good given by the Creator.¹⁷ But more accurately one should say that progress was at sharp odds with any ideology, Christian or otherwise, that denied human autonomy and our ability to work things for the better. This included Protestant sects, such as Arminianism, which gave humans the power to choose or reject Christ but still left the real work to the Almighty, and Catholicism, which gave the Church alone the power (and understanding) necessary to change things for the better. Conversely, a religious system—even a Christian one—that was willing to assign humans some part of the work could be construed as progressive, even if it did not grant everything that a nonbeliever might demand. In a sense, therefore, rather than thinking of progress as an alternative to conventional religion in the late eighteenth century, it is more accurate to think of progress as a world system that was trying to challenge or improve on older world systems, especially traditional Christianity.

In France particularly there were outright atheists for whom the doctrine of progress combined with a kind of materialism was in itself enough to explain human existence.¹⁸ Even for those who did not want to go that far, the very point of progress was to oppose Christianity directly, not just its theological doctrines but also the social structure and status of the Church, which supported the *ancien régime*. To quote the greatest enthusiast for progress, the Marquis de Condorcet: “Contempt of human sciences was one of the first features of Christianity. It had to avenge itself for the outrages of philosophy; it feared that spirit of investigation and doubt, that confidence of man in his own reason, the pest alike of all religious creeds.”¹⁹ The *philosophes* (as the French thinkers were called) were working and writing in a repressive society, controlled by monarch and Church and

other established institutions. It all eventually flew apart during the Revolution.

Britain was a very different sort of society. It had gotten revolution out of its system in the seventeenth century. If the result was not much of a democracy by our standards, at least the nation had a functioning parliament, and those who were skilled, talented, prudent, and adventuresome had a good chance to succeed. This happened most particularly in industry, for the British were the first to harness nature to massive schemes for producing goods mechanically rather than by hand. In ironworking, pottery, wool, and above all cotton, the British introduced factories and ways of turning power—especially the power of coal—to good account. This led to views of progress much more in tune with the pragmatic values of the day—utilitarian values that favored doing things efficiently, through division of labor, to increase happiness and decrease misery.

Although the British progressionists were often not particularly enthused by the Anglican Church, they had no underlying hostility to theological commitment, so long as ideology was well-integrated with progressive social goals. The economist Adam Smith, when speaking of the power of self-interest to organize society for the greater good, invoked the metaphor of an “Invisible Hand.” A repeated analogy of the time was that a deity who works through the laws of physics is far superior to one who works through miracles, in the same way that an industrialist who works through the laws of physics is far superior to a cottage laborer who works with his hands.

Strange as it may seem to us today, apocalyptic thinking stood behind progressionist philosophy no less than the philosophy of faith. One of the progressionists’ favorite biblical passages was Daniel 12:4, which states that in the latter days of earth’s history “many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase.” As one writer put it, “the *knowledge* that shall be *increased*, according to the prophet Daniel, means nothing less than a fruitful, influencing knowledge, a knowledge of

things pertaining to God and true godliness.”²⁰ Many people, including Isaac Newton, who devoted as much energy to biblical interpretation as he did to theoretical physics, took this as an invitation to push our God-given talents to the extreme, in order to complete God’s creation. Although divine interventions could still be expected, the tendency was to regard the future as naturalistically as the present: the “Government of the *Millennial Kingdom* will not be altogether different from That of the Ante-millennial or present *Kingdom of Christ*.” An increasingly popular interpretation of Revelation put the coming of Christ at the end of the millennium rather than at the beginning. Our biblically reinforced task was essentially to prepare for the good times to come, rather than to sit obediently and passively until God himself takes charge. A position like this, the variety of millennialism that stresses human effort and puts Christ’s coming later, is known as “postmillennialism.” The kind that has Christ coming before the millennium is “premillennialism.” Someone like Augustine who opts out of the prophecy business is an “amillennialist.”²¹

America of course did have its revolution, although (unlike the French Revolution) it was fought against British oppressors by colonists who now considered themselves Americans rather than British subjects. The causes of the revolution were many and complex, but before and after the decisive break, progressive ideas, generally imported from Britain and France, had significant influence. The importance of millennial speculations—Jonathan Edwards was one millennialist among many—is still a matter of much historical debate, but no one denies that they had some impact, maybe even major impact, on revolutionary thought.²² Certainly, there were lots of not-so-subtle hints about where the thousand-year rule would take place.

A new Jerusalem sent down from heav’n
 Shall grace our happy earth, perhaps this land,

Whose virgin bosom shall then receive, tho' late,
Myriads of saints with their almighty king,
To live and reign on earth a thousand years
Thence call'd Millennium. Paradise anew
Shall flourish, by no second Adam lost.²³

As in Britain, in America also one finds ideas about progress connected to deistic beliefs. People in the newly independent nation developed notions of free trade, an end to the poor house, support for the old and the sick, and even a kind of progressive taxation while reading Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* and the *Age of Reason*. In those tracts Paine attacked the forces of the establishment and especially their ideology. "What is it the Bible teaches us?—rapine, cruelty, and murder. What is it the Testament teaches us?—to believe the Almighty committed debauchery with a woman engaged to be married, and the belief of this debauchery is called faith." Although the founders tended to be more circumspect in their comments than Paine, a kind of progressivist deism marked the thought of Franklin, Washington, and Jefferson, among others. Franklin, who labored his whole life to increase knowledge and learning, gave up the idea of a personal god. George Washington, although a somewhat occasional Episcopalian, never took communion. Thomas Jefferson spoke of the Trinity as the "Abracadabra" of confidence men.²⁴

People like this were not atheist or even what came to be known as agnostic. Often they would insist indignantly that they were genuinely Christian. But they were moving beyond a belief in the God of Providence, who decides all and is uniquely responsible for our salvation. As happened in Britain, influential Americans came out of the eighteenth century more on the side of reason than of faith. And this starts to push us toward ideas of evolution.