

**WHAT'S
SO GREAT
ABOUT
CHRISTIANITY**

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Since 1947
**REGNERY
PUBLISHING, INC.**
An Eagle Publishing Company • Washington, DC

CONTENTS

A Note on the Interpretation of Scripture

Preface A Challenge to Believers—and Unbelievers

Part I: The Future of Christianity

Chapter One The Twilight of Atheism: The Global Triumph of Christianity

Chapter Two Survival of the Sacred: Why Religion Is Winning

Chapter Three God Is Not Great: The Atheist Assault on Religion

Chapter Four Miseducating the Young: Saving Children from Their Parents

Part II: Christianity and the West

Chapter Five Render unto Caesar: The Spiritual Basis
of Limited Government

Chapter Six The Evil That I Would Not: Christianity and Human Fallibility

Chapter Seven Created Equal: The Origin of Human Dignity

Part III: Christianity and Science

Chapter Eight Christianity and Reason: The Theological Roots of Science

Chapter Nine From Logos to Cosmos: Christianity and
the Invention of Invention

Chapter Ten An Atheist Fable: Reopening the Galileo Case

Part IV: The Argument from Design

Chapter Eleven A Universe with a Beginning: God and the Astronomers

Chapter Twelve A Designer Planet: Man's Special Place in Creation

Chapter Thirteen Paley Was Right: Evolution and the Argument from Design

Chapter Fourteen The Genesis Problem: The Methodological Atheism of Science

Part V: Christianity and Philosophy

Chapter Fifteen The World Beyond Our Senses:
Kant and the Limits of Reason

Chapter Sixteen In the Belly of the Whale: Why Miracles Are Possible

Chapter Seventeen A Skeptic's Wager: Pascal and the Reasonableness of Faith

Part VI: Christianity and Suffering

Chapter Eighteen Rethinking the Inquisition:
The Exaggerated Crimes of Religion

Chapter Nineteen A License to Kill: Atheism and the Mass Murders of History

Part VII: Christianity and Morality

Chapter Twenty Natural Law and Divine Law: The Objective
Foundations of Morality

Chapter Twenty-One The Ghost in the Machine: Why Man Is More Than Matter

Chapter Twenty-Two The Imperial "I": When the Self Becomes
the Arbiter of Morality

Chapter Twenty-Three Opiate of the Morally Corrupt:
Why Unbelief Is So Appealing

Chapter Twenty-Four The Problem of Evil: Where Is Atheism When Bad Things Happen?

Part VIII: Christianity and You

Chapter Twenty-Five Jesus among Other Gods: The Uniqueness of Christianity

Chapter Twenty-Six A Foretaste of Eternity:
How Christianity Can Change Your Life



THE TWILIGHT OF ATHEISM: THE GLOBAL TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY

*"The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes,
and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning."*

—Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*

GOD HAS COME BACK TO LIFE. The world is witnessing a huge explosion of religious conversion and growth, and Christianity is growing faster than any other religion. Nietzsche's proclamation "God is dead" is now proven false. Nietzsche is dead. The ranks of the unbelievers are shrinking as a proportion of the world's population. Secularism has lost its identification with progress and modernity, and consequently it has lost the main source of its appeal. God is very much alive, and His future prospects look to be excellent. This is the biggest comeback story of the twenty-first century.

If God is back, why don't we see it? The reason is that many of us live in the wrong neighborhood. "Visit a church at random next Sunday," Brent Staples writes in the *New York Times*, "and you will probably encounter a few dozen people sprinkled thinly over a sanctuary that was built to accommodate hundreds or even thousands: 'Yes, I've seen the "empty pews and white-haired congregants" that Staples describes.² But then, Staples lives in New York and I live in California. We live among people who are practically atheist.

Of course my neighbors do not think of themselves as atheist. Very few of them belong to atheist organizations or subscribe to atheist literature. Some of them who are highly educated like to think of themselves as agnostic: they haven't made up their minds because the evidence simply isn't in yet. Others even consider themselves Christian, either because they were born that way or because they attend church occasionally. The distinguishing characteristic of these people is that they live as if God did not exist. God makes no difference in their lives. This is "practical atheism." We all know people like this. Some of us hardly know anyone not like this. And sometimes we live this way ourselves.

If we live in the wrong neighborhood, we risk missing the most important development

of our time: the global revival of religion. It's happening on every continent. In my native country of India, Hinduism is undergoing a resurgence. So is Islam. As I have written about Islamic radicalism and terrorism I am often asked, "When will the Muslims understand the importance of secularism? When will we see an Islamic Reformation?" My answer is that Muslims will never understand the importance of secularism. Nor do they need to, because as we shall see, secularism is increasingly unimportant as a global phenomenon. Moreover, Islam *is* in the middle of a reformation. We see a resurgence of Muslim piety not just in the Middle East but also in Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Turkey, and East Africa. At one time Turkey provided a model of Islamic secularism, but not any longer. No Muslim country is going the way of Turkey, and in recent years even Turkey has stopped going the way of Turkey.

Some Western analysts describe the religious revivals around the world in terms of the growth of "fundamentalism." This is the fallacy of ethnocentrism, of seeing the world through the lens of our own homegrown prejudices. Remember that *fundamentalism* is a term drawn from Protestant Christianity. It is an American coinage that refers to a group of early twentieth-century Protestant activists who organized against Darwinian evolution and who championed the literal reading of the Bible. Fundamentalism is a meaningless term outside this context.

There are, of course, Hindu militants and Islamic radicals of the bin Laden stripe, and they are indeed a menace to the world. But the growth of religious militancy and the growth of religion are very different. One may seek to benefit from the other, but the two should not be confused. The resurgence I am talking about is the global revitalization of traditional religion. This means traditional Hinduism, traditional Islam, and traditional Christianity. By "traditional" I mean religion as it has been understood and practiced over the centuries. This is the type of religion that is booming.

Traditional religion is the mainstream, but it is not the only form in which religion appears today. There is also liberal religion. One can hardly speak of liberal Islam, as liberalism is essentially a nonexistent force in the Muslim world. But there are liberal Jews, whose Jewishness seems largely a matter of historical memory and cultural habits. Here in the West, there are lots of liberal Christians. Some of them have assumed a kind of reverse mission: instead of being the church's missionaries to the world, they have become the world's missionaries to the church. They devote their moral energies to trying to make the church more democratic, to assure equal rights for women, to legitimize homosexual marriage, and so on. A small but influential segment of liberal Christianity rejects all the central doctrines of Christianity. H. Richard Niebuhr famously summed up their credo: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."³

I have met liberal Christians who are good and sincere people. But their version of Christianity is retreating, in two senses. Liberal Christians are distinguished by how much intellectual and moral ground they concede to the adversaries of Christianity. "Granted, no rational person today can believe in miracles, but ..." "True, the Old Testament God seems a mighty vengeful fellow, but...." "Admittedly religion is responsible for most of the conflict and oppression in history, but...."

This yes-but Christianity in full intellectual withdrawal, and it is also becoming less relevant. The liberal churches are losing members in droves. Once these churches welcomed one in six Americans; now they see one in thirty. In 1960 the Presbyterian

church had 4.2 million members; now it has 2.4 million. The Episcopal church had 3.4 million; now it has 2.3 million. The United Church of Christ had 2.2 million; now it has 1.3 million!' Traditional Christians who remain within liberal churches become increasingly alienated. Some have become so disgusted that they have put themselves under the authority of more traditional clerics based in countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast.

Unfortunately the central themes of some of the liberal churches have become indistinguishable from those of the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Organization for Women, and the homosexual rights movement. Why listen to Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong drone on when you can get the same message and much more interesting visuals at San Francisco's gay pride parade? The traditional churches, not the liberal churches, are growing in America. In 1960, for example, the churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention had 8.7 million members. Now they have 16.4 million.⁵

The growth of traditional religion and the decline of liberal religion pose a serious problem for a conventional way of understanding religious trends. This is the way of secularization: the idea that as an inevitable result of science, reason, progress, and modernization, the West will continue to grow more secular, followed by the rest of the world. The more confident exponents of secularization believe, as Peter Berger puts it, that "eventually Iranian mullahs, Pentecostal preachers, and Tibetan lamas will all think and act like professors of literature at American universities."⁶

For a good part of the last century, this secularization narrative seemed plausible. Secular people believed it and reveled in it, while religious people believed it and bemoaned it. But now we see a problem with the thesis. If secularization were proceeding inexorably, then religious people should be getting less religious, and so conservative churches should be shrinking and liberal churches growing. In fact, the opposite is the case.

Some scholars put this down to "backlash" against secularization, but this only begs the question: what is causing this backlash? The secularization thesis was based on the presumption that science and modernity would satisfy the impulses and needs once met by religion. But a rebellion against secularization suggests that perhaps important needs are still unmet, and so people are seeking a revival of religion—perhaps in a new form—to address their specific concerns within a secular society.

Of course the secularization thesis is not entirely invalid. In Europe, Australia, and Canada, religion has been expunged from the cultural mainstream. It has been largely relegated to a tourist phenomenon; when you go to Chartres and Canterbury, the guides tell you about architecture and art history and little about what the people who created those masterpieces actually believed. According to the European Values Survey, regular churchgoers number, depending on the country, between 10 and 25 percent of the population. Only one in five Europeans says that religion is important in life. Czech president Vaclav Havel has rightly described Europe as "the first atheistic civilization in the history of mankind."⁷

The religious picture in Europe is not unremittingly bleak. Ninety percent of Greeks acknowledge the existence of God, and only 5 percent of Greeks are atheists. Ireland still has church attendance figures of around 45 percent, twice as high as the Continent as a whole, although Irish Catholicism has also weakened in recent decades. Along with Ireland, Poland and Slovakia are two of the most religious countries in Europe.⁸ And some commentators have noted that even Europeans who are not religious continue to describe

themselves as "spiritual." These analysts argue that Europe has not abandoned religion in general but only "organized" religion.

But if Europe generally supports the secularization thesis, the United States presents a much more problematic case. America has not gone the way of Europe. True, church attendance in the United States has declined in the past three decades. Still, some 40 percent of Americans say they attend church on Sundays. More than 90 percent of Americans believe in God, and 60 percent say their faith is important to them. Surveying the data on religion, Paul Bloom writes in the *Atlantic Monthly* that "well over half of Americans believe in miracles, the devil, and angels. Most Americans believe that after death they will actually reunite with relatives and get to meet God." All of this is a serious difficulty for the secularization thesis, because America is at the forefront of modernity. The thesis would predict that America would be the most secular society in the world. In fact, America is the most religious country in the Western world.

Perhaps the greatest problem for the secularization theory is that in an era of increasing globalization and modernization, the world as a whole is becoming more religious, not less. In a recent survey, Pippa Norris and Ron Inglehart sum up the evidence. Despite the advance of secularization in the West, they write, "The world as a whole now has more people with traditional religious views than ever before, and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population." Consequently, the West is more secular but "the world as a whole is becoming more religious."

Even more remarkable is that the religious revival is occurring in places that are rapidly modernizing. China and India today have the fastest growth rates in the world, and religion is thriving in both places. Turkey is the one of the most modern of the Muslim countries, and Islam has steadily gained strength there. In Central and South America, the upwardly mobile classes are embracing Pentecostal Christianity.

The global spread of American culture, with the secular values it carries, seems not to have arrested or even slowed the religious upsurge. The reason is that many non-Western cultures are actively resisting secularism. A common slogan in Asia today is "modernization without Westernization." Many people want American prosperity and American technology, but they want to use these to preserve and strengthen their traditional way of life. They want to live in a world of multiple modernities.

We often read that Islam is the fastest-growing religion. Not true. Christianity is the fastest-growing religion in the world today. Islam is second. While Islam grows mainly through reproduction—which is to say by Muslims having large families—Christianity spreads through rapid conversion as well as natural increase. Islam has become the fastest-growing religion in Europe, which for more than a thousand years has been the home of Christianity. Catholic writer Hilaire Belloc wrote in 1920 that "the faith is Europe and Europe is the faith." Belloc was convinced that the future of Christianity lay in Europe.

Ironically, while Europe has moved away from Christianity, the Christian religion has been expanding its influence in Central and South America, in Africa, and in Asia. For the first time in history, Christianity has become a universal religion. It is in fact the only religion with a global reach. Buddhism and Islam, like Christianity, are religions with global aspirations, but these aspirations have not been realized. Buddhism never established itself even in the land of its founding, India, although it found adherents in the cultures of Southern and Eastern Asia. Even though it has a few followers in the West, Buddhism remains a religion with, at best, a regional impact. Islam is vastly stronger, but

even Islam is regional, with little or no sway in the United States, Canada, Central and South America, or Australia. By contrast, Christianity is a force on every continent and in every major region of the world, with the sole exception of the heartland of Islam, the Middle East.

The new face of Christianity is no longer white and blond but yellow, black, and brown. "If we want to visualize a typical contemporary Christian," Philip Jenkins writes in *The Next Christendom*, "we should think of a woman living in a village in Nigeria or in a Brazilian favela." The vital centers of Christianity today are no longer Geneva, Rome, Paris, or London. They are Buenos Aires, Manila, Kinshasa, and Addis Ababa. "The era of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes," Jenkins observes, "and the day of Southern Christianity is dawning."

In 1900, more than 80 percent of Christians lived in Europe and America. Today 60 percent live in the developing world. More than two out of three evangelical Christians now live in Asia, Africa, and South America. Here are some numbers Jenkins provides: Europe today has 560 million Christians and America has 260 million, yet many of these are Christian in name only. In comparison, there are 480 million Christians in South America, 313 million in Asia, and 360 million in Africa. The vast majority of these are practicing Christians. There are more churchgoing Presbyterians in Ghana than in Scotland.

Oddly enough, this Christian growth occurred after the period of European conquest and colonialism ended. The old boys in pith helmets are long gone, but the faith that first came with them has endured and now thrives without them. It's just like the early times of Christianity. After Constantine converted and Theodosius proclaimed Christianity the state religion toward the end of the fourth century, Christianity was carried by the Roman empire. Yet the faith spread fastest after the collapse of that empire, and soon all of Europe was Christian. We're witnessing a comparable pace of growth for Christianity in the rest of the world.

A century ago, less than 10 percent of Africa was Christian. Today it's nearly 50 percent. That's an increase from 10 million people in 1900 to more than 350 million today. Uganda alone has nearly 20 million Christians and is projected to have 50 million by the middle of the century. Some African congregations have grown so big that their churches are running out of space. While Western preachers routinely implore people to come every Sunday to fill the pews, some African preachers ask their members to limit their attendance to every second or third Sunday to give others a chance to hear the message.

Central and South America are witnessing the explosive growth of Pentecostalism. As David Martin shows in his study *Tongues of Fire*, partly this is a shift within Christianity: millions of South American Catholics have become evangelical Protestants. In Brazil, for example, there are now 50 million evangelical Protestants whereas a few decades ago there weren't enough to count. The movement of Catholics into Protestant evangelicalism should not be considered purely lateral, however, as the conversion of lackadaisical nominal Catholics to an active, energized evangelicalism can perhaps be considered a net gain for Christianity. Even within Catholicism there is an expanding charismatic movement that has grown in response to the success of the Protestant evangelicals. This charismatic Catholicism emphasizes many of the same themes as "born again" Christianity, including a personal relationship with Christ. And the Catholic numbers remain huge: Brazil had 50 million Catholics in 1950, but now it has 120 million.

Despite the limitations imposed by the Chinese government, it is estimated that there are

now 100 million Christians in China who worship in underground evangelical and Catholic churches. At current growth rates, David Aikman observes in his book *Jesus in Beijing*, China will in a few decades become the largest Christian country in the world.¹⁴ In Korea, where Christians already outnumber Buddhists, there are numerous mega-churches with more than 10,000 members each. The Yoido Full Gospel Church reports 750,000 members. The Catholic church in the Philippines reports 60 million members, and is projected to have 120 million by mid-century.

What distinguishes these Christians, Philip Jenkins writes, is that they immerse themselves in the world of the Bible to a degree that even devout Western Christians do not. For poor people around the world, the social landscape of the Bible is quite familiar. They, too, live in a world of hardship, poverty, money-lenders, and lepers. The themes of exile and persecution resonate with them. Supernatural evil seems quite real to them, and they have little problem in understanding the concept of hell. Some of them even expect the miracles of ancient times to be witnessed in their own lifetimes. I remember an African preacher who visited a church I used to attend in Northern Virginia. He insisted that through God's grace he had performed innumerable healings. When one of the assistant pastors looked at him a bit doubtfully, he pointed to the Bible and said, "Young man, there is a big difference between you and me. You see this book right here? We believe it."

This Third World Christianity is coming our way. South Korea has become the world's second-largest source of Christian missionaries, with 12,000 preaching the faith abroad. Only the United States sends more missionaries to other countries. We may be seeing the beginning of a startling reversal. At one time Christian missionaries went to the far continents of Africa and Asia, where white priests in robes proclaimed the Bible to wide-eyed and uncomprehending brown and black people. In the future, we may well see black and brown missionaries proclaim the Bible to wide-eyed and uncomprehending white people in the West.

We might think that this preaching will fall on unreceptive ears. But I'm not so sure. The *Washington Post* reports that there are 150 churches in Denmark and more than 250 in Britain run by foreigners as "part of a growing trend of preachers from developing nations coming to Western Europe." Stendor Johansen, a Danish sea captain, seems to reflect the sentiments of many Europeans who are joining the new congregations. "The Danish church is boring," he says. "I feel energized when I leave one of these services." If more people come to share these sentiments then secularization may ultimately be reversed even in Europe.

Peter Berger writes about what he calls the "myth of secularization." He means that the thesis of inevitable secularization has now lost its credibility. In fact, it is going the way of Zeus and Baal. Berger's work points to the reason for this. Ultimately secularization may be reversed even in Europe.

Berger argues that modernization helps people triumph over necessity but it also produces a profound crisis of purpose in modern life. The greater the effects of modernization, the stronger the social anxiety and the striving for "something more." As Wolfhart Pannenberg puts it, "Secular culture itself produces a deep need for meaning in life and therefore also for religion." This may not be religion in the same form in which it is imbibed in Nigeria or Korea, but it is traditional religion all the same, no less vital for having adapted to new circumstances. It is quite possible that a renewed Christianity can improve modern life by correcting some of the deficiencies and curbing some of the

excesses of modernity.

I have found this to be true in my own life. I am a native of India, and my ancestors were converted to Christianity by Portuguese missionaries. As this was the era of the Portuguese Inquisition, some force and bludgeoning may also have been involved. When I came to America as a student in 1978, my Christianity was largely a matter of birth and habit. But even as I plunged myself into modern life in the United

States, my faith slowly deepened. G. K. Chesterton calls this the "revolt into orthodoxy." Like Chesterton, I find myself rebelling against extreme secularism and finding in Christianity some remarkable answers to both intellectual and practical concerns. So I am grateful to those stern inquisitors for bringing me into the orbit of Christianity, even though I am sure my ancestors would not have shared my enthusiasm. Mine is a Christianity that is countercultural in the sense that it opposes powerful trends in modern Western culture. Yet it is thoroughly modern in that it addresses questions and needs raised by life in that culture. I don't know how I could live well without it.

In the end, though, my story doesn't matter very much, and neither does it matter whether the West returns to Christianity. Perhaps the non-Western Christians will convert the Western unbelievers, and perhaps they won't. Either way, they are the future, they know it, and now we know it too. Christianity may come in a different garb than it has for the past several centuries, but Christianity is winning, and secularism is losing. The future is always unpredictable, but one trend seems clear. God is the future, and atheism is on its way out.



SURVIVAL OF THE SACRED: WHY RELIGION IS WINNING

"The vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply!"

—Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

THE CONTINUED GROWTH OF RELIGION worldwide has not gone unnoticed by leading atheists. Some of these nonbelievers, most of them Darwinists, express candid puzzlement at religion's enduring vitality. These Darwinists are convinced that there must be some biological explanation for why, in every culture since the beginning of history, man has found and continues to find solace in religion. Biologist Richard Dawkins confesses that religion poses a "major puzzle to anyone who thinks in a Darwinian way."

Here, from the evolutionary point of view, is the problem. Scholars like anthropologist Scott Atran presume that religious beliefs are nothing more than illusions. Atran contends that religious belief requires taking "what is materially false to be true" and "what is materially true to be false." Atran and others believe that religion requires a commitment to "factually impossible worlds." The question, then, is why humans would evolve in such a way that they come to believe in things that don't exist.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett states the problem clearly: "The ultimate measure of evolutionary value is fitness—the capacity to replicate more successfully than the competition does." Yet on the face of it religion seems useless from an evolutionary point of view. It costs time and money, and it induces its members to make sacrifices that undermine their well-being for the benefit of others, who are sometimes total strangers.

Religious people build cathedrals and pyramids that have very little utility except as houses of worship and burial. The ancient Hebrews sacrificed their fattest calves to Yahweh, and even today people slaughter goats and chickens on altars. Religious people sometimes forgo certain foods—the cow is holy to the Hindus, and the pig unholy to the Muslims. Christians give tithes and financial offerings in church. The Jews keep holy the Sabbath, as Christians keep Sunday for church. Religious people recite prayers and go on pilgrimages. Some become missionaries or devote their lives to serving others. Some are even willing to die for their religious beliefs.

The evolutionary biologist is puzzled: why would evolved creatures like human beings, bent on survival and reproduction, do things that seem unrelated and even inimical to those

objectives? This is a critical question, not only because religion poses an intellectual dilemma for Darwinists, but also because Darwinists are hoping that by explaining the existence of religion they can expose its natural roots and undermine its supernatural authority. Biologist E. O. Wilson writes that "we have come to the crucial stage in the history of biology when religion itself is subject to the explanations of the natural sciences?" He expresses the hope that sometime soon "the final decisive edge enjoyed by scientific naturalism will come from its capacity to explain traditional religion, its chief competitor, as a wholly material phenomenon."

So how far have these evolutionary theories progressed in accounting for the success of religion? "The proximate cause of religion might be hyperactivity in a particular node of the brain?" Dawkins writes. He also speculates that "the idea of immortality survives and spreads because it caters to wishful thinking." But it makes no evolutionary sense for minds to develop comforting beliefs that are evidently false. Cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker explains, "A freezing person finds no comfort in believing he is warm. A person face to face with a lion is not put at ease by the conviction that he is a rabbit." Wishful thinking of this sort would quickly have become extinct as its practitioners froze or were eaten.

Yet Pinker's own solution to the problem is no better than Dawkins's. He suggests that there might be a "God module" in the brain that predisposes people to believe in the Almighty. Such a module, Pinker writes, might serve no survival purpose but could have evolved as a byproduct of other modules with evolutionary value. This is another way of saying there is no Darwinian explanation. After all, if a "God module" produces belief in God, how about a "Darwin module" that produces belief in evolution?

Still, the question raised by the Darwinists is not a foolish one. Biologists like Dawkins and Wilson say there simply must be some natural and evolutionary explanation for the universality and persistence of religious belief, and they are right. There is such an explanation, and I am pleased to provide one in this chapter. The Reverend Randy Alcorn, founder of Eternal Perspective Ministries in Oregon, sometimes presents his audiences with two creation stories and asks them whether it matters which one is true. In the secular account, "You are the descendant of a tiny cell of primordial protoplasm washed up on an empty beach three and a half billion years ago. You are the blind and arbitrary product of time, chance, and natural forces. You are a mere grab-bag of atomic particles, a conglomeration of genetic substance. You exist on a tiny planet in a minute solar system in an empty corner of a meaningless universe. You are a purely biological entity, different only in degree but not in kind from a microbe, virus, or amoeba. You have no essence beyond your body, and at death you will cease to exist entirely. In short, you came from nothing and are going nowhere?"

In the Christian view, by contrast, "You are the special creation of a good and all-powerful God. You are created in His image, with capacities to think, feel, and worship that set you above all other life forms. You differ from the animals not simply in degree but in kind. Not only is your kind unique, but you are unique among your kind. Your Creator loves you so much and so intensely desires your companionship and affection that He has a perfect plan for your life. In addition, God gave the life of His only son that you might spend eternity with Him. If you are willing to accept the gift of salvation, you can become a child of God:'

Now imagine two groups of people—let's call them the secular tribe and the religious tribe—who subscribe to these two worldviews. Which of the two tribes is more likely to

survive, prosper, and multiply? The religious tribe is made up of people who have an animating sense of purpose. The secular tribe is made up of people who are not sure why they exist at all. The religious tribe is composed of individuals who view their every thought and action as consequential. The secular tribe is made up of matter that cannot explain why it is able to think at all.

Should evolutionists like Dennett, Dawkins, Pinker, and Wilson be surprised, then, to see that religious tribes are flourishing? Throughout the world, religious groups attract astounding numbers of followers and religious people are showing their confidence in their way of life and in the future by having more children. By contrast, atheist conventions draw only a handful of embittered souls. One of the largest atheist organizations, American Atheists, has around 2,500 members. Throw a stone in the faculty parking lot of an elite American or European university and you have a good chance of hitting an atheist. But throw a stone anywhere else and you really have to aim.

The important point is not just that atheism is unable to compete with religion in attracting followers, but also that the lifestyle of practical atheism seems to produce listless tribes that cannot even reproduce themselves. Sociologists Pippa Norris and Ron Inglehart note that many richer, more secular countries are "producing only about half as many children as would be needed to replace the adult population" while many poorer, more religious countries are "producing two or three times as many children as would be needed to replace the adult population." The consequence, so predictable that one might almost call it a law, is that "the religious population is growing fast, while the secular number is shrinking."

Russia is one of the most atheist countries in the world, and abortions there outnumber live births by a ratio of two to one. Russia's birth rate has fallen so low that the nation is now losing 700,000 people a year. Japan, perhaps the most secular country in Asia, is also on a kind of population diet: its 130 million people are expected to drop to around 100 million in the next few decades. Canada, Australia, and New Zealand find themselves in a similar predicament.

Then there is Europe. The most secular continent on the globe is decadent in the quite literal sense that its population is rapidly shrinking. Birth rates are abysmally low in France, Italy, Spain, the Czech Republic, and Sweden. The nations of Western Europe today show some of the lowest birth rates ever recorded, and Eastern European birth rates are comparably low. Historians have noted that Europe is suffering the most sustained reduction in its population since the Black Death in the fourteenth century, when one in three Europeans succumbed to the plague. Lacking the strong religious identity that once characterized Christendom, atheist Europe seems to be a civilization on its way out. Nietzsche predicted that European decadence would produce a miserable "last man" devoid of any purpose beyond making life comfortable and making provision for regular fornication. Well, Nietzsche's "last man" is finally here, and his name is Sven.

Eric Kaufmann has noted that in America, where high levels of immigration have helped to compensate for falling native birth rates, birth rates among religious people are almost twice as high as those among secular people. This trend has also been noticed in Europe.¹¹ What this means is that, by a kind of natural selection, the West is likely to evolve in a more religious direction. This tendency will likely accelerate if Western societies continue to import immigrants from more religious societies, whether they are Christian or Muslim. Thus we can expect even the most secular regions of the world, through the

sheer logic of demography, to become less secular over time.

In previous decades, scholars have tried to give a purely economic explanation for demographic trends. The general idea was that population was a function of affluence. Sociologists noted that as people and countries became richer, they had fewer children. Presumably, primitive societies needed children to help in the fields, and more prosperous societies no longer did. Poor people were also believed to have more children because sex provided one of their only means of recreation. Moreover, poor people are often ignorant about birth control or don't have access to it. From this perspective, large families were explained as a phenomenon of poverty and ignorance.

This economic explanation is partly true, but it falls short of the full picture. Many poor people have large families despite having access to birth control and movie tickets; it turns out they generally *want* larger families. Sure, they are more economically dependent on their children, but on the other hand, rich people can afford more children. Wealthy people in America today tend to have one child or none, but wealthy families in the past tended to have three or more children. The real difference is not merely in the level of income—it is that in the past children were valued as gifts from God, and traditional cultures still view them that way.

Muslim countries, with their oil revenues, are by no means the poorest in the world and yet they have among the highest birth rates. Practicing Catholics, orthodox Jews, Mormons, and evangelical Protestants are by no means the poorest groups in America, and yet they have large families. Clearly religious factors are at work here. The declining birth rates in the West as a whole are, in considerable part, due to secularization. The religious motive for childbearing has been greatly attenuated, and children are now viewed by many people as instruments of self-gratification. The old biblical principle was "Be fruitful and multiply." The new one is "Have as many children as will enhance your lifestyle."

The economic forecasters of the disappearance of religion have proven themselves to be false prophets. Not only is religion thriving, but it is thriving because it helps people to adapt and survive in the world. In his book *Darwin's Cathedral*, evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson argues that religion provides something that secular society doesn't: a vision of transcendent purpose. Consequently, religious people develop a zest for life that is, in a sense, unnatural. They exhibit a hopefulness about the future that may exceed what is warranted by how the world is going. And they forge principles of morality and charity that simply make them more cohesive, adaptive, and successful than groups whose members lack this binding and elevating force.

My conclusion is that it is not religion but atheism that requires a Darwinian explanation. Atheism is a bit like homosexuality: one is not sure where it fits into a doctrine of natural selection. Why would nature select people who mate with others of the same sex, a process with no reproductive advantage at all? It seems equally perplexing why nature would breed a group of people who see no higher purpose to life or the universe. Here is where the biological expertise of Dawkins, Pinker, and Wilson could prove illuminating. Maybe they can turn their Darwinian lens on themselves and help us understand how atheism, like the human tailbone and the panda's thumb, somehow survived as an evolutionary leftover of our primitive past.

CHAPTER THREE



GOD IS NOT GREAT: THE ATHEIST ASSAULT ON RELIGION

"Boldness was not formerly a characteristic of atheists as such. But of late they are grown active, designing, turbulent, and seditious."

—Edmund Burke

ALARMED BY THE RISING POWER of religion around the world, atheists in the West today have grown more outspoken and militant. What we are witnessing in America is atheist backlash. The atheists thought they were winning, but now they realize that, far from dying quietly, religion is on the global upswing. So the atheists are striking back, using all the resources they can command. This is not a religious war but a war over religion, and it has been declared by leading Western atheists who have commenced hostilities.

Statistics seem to suggest that in America the number of atheists is growing. The Pluralism Project at Harvard reports that people with no religious affiliation now number nearly forty million. That's almost 15 percent of the population, up from less than 10 percent in 1990, and so a virtual doubling of the atheist ranks in a single decade. Science writer John Horgan boasts that "there are more of us heathens out there than you might guess." It's unclear from the data if there are more atheists, or simply more people who are open about their atheism.

2 Atheists come in different varieties, making up their own sectarian camps. There are secularists, nonbelievers, non-theists, apatheists, anti-theists, agnostics, skeptics, free thinkers, and humanists. Fine distinctions separate some of these groups. While agnostics say they don't know whether God exists, apatheists say they don't care. Some of these groups are not technically atheist because an atheist is one who declares God does not exist. But even so they are de facto atheists, because their ignorance and indifference amounts to a practical rejection of God's role in the world. In this book I use the term atheist in its broad sense to refer to those who deny God and live as if He did not exist.

The distinguishing element of modern atheism is its intellectual militancy and moral self-confidence. We have seen a spate of atheist books in recent years, like Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*, Victor Stenger's *God: The*

Failed Hypothesis, and Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great*. Other writers, like E. O. Wilson, Carl Sagan, Daniel Dennett, and Steven Pinker, have also weighed in with anti-religious and anti-Christian tracts. In Europe, the *Wall Street Journal* reports, philosopher Michel Onfray has rallied the unbelievers with his bestselling *Atheist Manifesto*, which posits a "final battle" against the forces of Christianity.

Never before have we seen what we are seeing now, which is what Dawkins terms a widespread assertion of "atheist pride." Prominent atheists are staging a huge "coming out" party. Two of them, American philosopher Daniel Dennett and British biologist Richard Dawkins, published articles calling on fellow unbelievers to give up the term "atheist," as the term, they suggested, has such negative connotations. Their alternative? Dennett and Dawkins want to be called "brights." Yes, "brights," as in "I am a bright." Dawkins defines a bright as one who espouses "a worldview that is free of supernaturalism and mysticism." According to Dennett, "We brights don't believe in ghosts or elves or the Easter Bunny—or God." Dennett's implication is clear: brights are the smart people who don't fall for silly superstitions.

Brights and other nonbelievers are not impressed with the growth of religious belief around the world. When I published an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* detailing this growth, I received lots of indignant letters. One theme stood out: the stupidity or irrationality of believers. "The reason that religious tribes are growing around the world is that it is much easier to believe in the unproven than to think and to ask questions." "Most of the world is impoverished, uneducated, and plagued by war and disease. So I take little solace that so many of the besieged believe in fairy tales in order to make their lives a little easier." "It's amazing that anyone with an ounce of sense can believe in gods, spooks, and leprechauns. No wonder the world is such a mess with so many irrational people in it." "The world is already overcrowded. So thank heaven we atheists are keeping our number down. The poor, religious people in other countries seem to be breeding like mice."

Yes, there is a bit of arrogance here, but in the view of the atheists and the brights, it is justified. Long considered a marginal and reticent minority, atheists are now lashing out at religion with enormous gusto. Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg writes, "Anything that we scientists can do to weaken the hold of religion should be done and may in the end be our greatest contribution to civilization." Sam Harris in *The End of Faith* condemns what he terms "the lunatic influence of religious belief." Christopher Hitchens writes, "All religions and all churches are equally demented in their belief in divine intervention, divine intercession, or even the existence of the divine in the first place." Dawkins adds, "The great unmentionable evil at the center of our culture is monotheism. From a barbaric Bronze Age text known as the Old Testament, three anti-human religions have evolved: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam."

What gives the atheists such confidence? The answer, in a word, is science. Many atheists believe that modern science—the best known way to accumulate knowledge, the proven technique for giving us airplanes and computers and drugs that kill bacteria—has vindicated the nonbeliever's position. And it seems that a majority of scientists in the United States are atheists. Only 40 percent—a sizable minority, but a minority nevertheless—believe in a personal God. And among members of the elite National Academy of Sciences, only 7 percent of scientists can be counted among the ranks of the believers." These figures have remained generally consistent over several decades, with

the proportion of atheists rising slightly.

But what is it about science that supports atheism? For one, science seems to work better than religion. "We can pray over the cholera victim," Carl Sagan writes, "or we can give her 500 milligrams of tetracycline every twelve hours." In such cases, Sagan points out, even Christians are likely to supplement their prayers with medicine. Another reason, according to Steven Pinker, is that "the modern sciences of cosmology, geology, biology, and archaeology have made it impossible for a scientifically literate person to believe that the biblical story of creation actually took place." While science relies on the principle that "nothing is more sacred than the facts," Sam Harris charges that "theology is now little more than a branch of human ignorance. Indeed it is ignorance with wings."

In making their case, the atheists often appeal to the revolutionary influence of Charles Darwin. In his book *The Blind Watchmaker*, Dawkins writes that "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist." He points out that the universe and its creatures show irrefutable evidence of design. Before Darwin, there was no plausible explanation for that design other than to posit a designer. So atheists had no way to account for life's diversity and complexity. Many—including skeptic David Hume—were forced to concede that each creature was fitted with the equipment needed for its survival by some sort of higher being.

The great achievement of Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection, Dawkins and others say, is that it shows how creatures that appear to be designed have in fact evolved according to the pressures of chance and survival. Atheists now have an alternative explanation for why fish have gills, why birds have wings, and why human beings have brains and arms and lungs. Indeed, in the atheist view, evolution refutes the biblical account of human creation, exposing it as a crude and primitive myth. Carl Sagan remarks that "as science advances, there seems to be less and less for God to do.... Whatever it is we cannot explain lately is attributed to God.... And then after a while, we explain it, and so that's no longer God's realm.' This is none other than the God of the Gaps, who is forced by science into ever greater irrelevance. Dawkins argues that contrary to the claims of religion, we humans "are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes."

In his book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Dennett contends that Darwin's theories are a kind of "universal acid" that "eats through just about every traditional concept, and leaves in its wake a revolutionized worldview" about the nature of man and the universe. Specifically, Dennett and others interpret Darwinism to mean that all life can be understood entirely in natural and material terms. Man is nothing more than matter in motion. The soul? A product of fantasy. The afterlife? A myth. Human purpose? An illusion.

Leading biologists spell out some of the implications. As Darwin has shown how life is "the result of a natural process," Francisco Ayala writes, we are "without any need to resort to a Creator." In an essay on evolution and its implications, William Provine writes, "Modern science directly implies that there are no inherent moral or ethical laws, no absolute guiding principles for human society.... We must conclude that when we die, we die, and that is the end of us."

Many scientific atheists portray man as simply a carbon-based machine, a purely material object whose belief in immaterial things is a kind of epiphenomenon or illusion. Biologist Francis Crick, who helped to discover the structure of DNA, writes that all biology is reducible to the laws of physics and chemistry. Life is the product of the same

mechanical operations as the inanimate matter in nature. Consciousness is "no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules." Biologist E. O. Wilson writes that the hidden operations of our mental activity give us "the illusion of free will."

For centuries, cognitive scientist Steven Pinker points out, religion has taught men to believe in an immortal soul that inhabits our bodies, a kind of "ghost in the machine." But modern science has, in Pinker's view, destroyed that belief. "The mind is the physiological activity of the brain" and "the brain, like other organs, is shaped by the genes" and those have been "shaped by natural selection and other evolutionary processes." Therefore the mind is nothing more than "an entity in the physical world, part of a causal chain of physical events." When the brain decays through aging or disease, the mind disappears. As for the soul? Pinker ringingly declares that "the ghost in the machine has been exorcised."

This scientific atheism has its roots in the Enlightenment. Leading thinkers of the Enlightenment, like Voltaire, were anti-clerical and anti-religious rather than atheist. Denis Diderot and Baron d'Holbach did, however, introduce a full-fledged atheism to the educated population of Europe. These thinkers viewed science as a privileged form of knowledge based on reason and criticism and testing, and viewed religious doctrine as a form of ignorance rooted in myth, coercion, and fear. As Voltaire put it, "There are no sects in geometry." That's because there are methods of verification that enable all scientifically minded people to agree on the facts.

Modern doctrines of materialism and naturalism, which hold that matter is the only reality and that there are no supernatural influences in nature, have their foundation in the atheistic wing of the Enlightenment. Modern atheists have employed these ideas to formulate their influential theories. Marx, for instance, portrayed religion as the "opiate of the masses," a drug that dulls the mind, preventing it from comprehending the scientific forces acting upon history. Freud, in his 1927 book *The Future of an Illusion*, termed belief in God a comforting illusion invented by human beings to avoid facing the reality of death. When Richard Dawkins states in *The God Delusion* that he holds his beliefs "not because of reading a holy book but because I have studied the evidence." he is placing himself squarely in this tradition of the skeptical Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment critique of religion was not merely an intellectual critique but also a moral critique. This is the case with the atheism of today, which involves a moral denunciation of God's role in the world as well as a condemnation of the evil influence of religion throughout history. Christopher Hitchens writes glibly of the "moral superiority of atheism." The leading figure of this type of atheism was philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche accepted Darwin's theory of evolution as true, but he detested Darwinism for what he took to be its exaltation of a certain brutish type that survived in nature through raw force. Nietzsche's atheism is of a very different pedigree than Dawkins's. Nietzsche would have taken Dawkins's breed of Darwinism as the mark of a particularly low and unimaginative human type, widely found in England. Nietzsche too was interested in survival of the fittest, but to him this meant the cultural survival of great and noble and artistically imaginative forms of humanity. Nietzsche termed his superior type of human being the *abermensch*, or "overman."

Nietzsche hated religion, and most of all he hated Christianity. For him, Christianity represented hostility to life, a seething hatred of existence dressed up as faith in another

life. Nietzsche also viewed Christianity as a foe of nature, depriving the greater man of his instinctive and rightful desire to subdue and crush the inferior man. In Nietzsche's view Christianity invented morality as a device to keep the strong men of the world in check and to con them into sharing the fruits of their genius with lesser men. Christianity, in short, was a "slave morality" designed for losers, which for Nietzsche explained its immense popularity. Nietzsche's aristocratic atheism has few open advocates today, but many themes from his polemic against Christianity remain influential.

One such theme is that the God of Christianity is an autocrat. Nietzsche's objection was not to His tyranny, but to the fact that He represented the wrong kind of tyranny. Nietzsche condemned the Christian God for humbling the great and exalting the lowly. Modern atheists like Christopher Hitchens also castigate the Christian God for his "desert morality." Slavery and patriarchy are usually mentioned in the indictment, but the real objection is to the moral severity of Christian ethics, which imposes strict commandments and forecasts hell for those who fail to abide by them. Hitchens charges that "the religious impulse lies close to the authoritarian, if not the totalitarian personality," and he especially faults religion for "sexual repression." In this line of thinking, God is condemned in the name of freedom, especially the moral freedom for human beings to evaluate for themselves what is right and what is wrong.

A second major theme of atheist discourse is the historical crimes of religion. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the religious wars, and the witch trials all feature prominently in this moral indictment. "In the so-called ages of faith," Bertrand Russell writes in *Why I Am Not a Christian*, "there was every kind of cruelty practiced upon all sorts of people in the name of religion." In recent years, with the rise of Islamic radicalism and terrorism, atheists commonly invoke bin Laden and his murderous co-conspirators to show that religion in general is a motivating force for violence and oppression. Columnist Wendy Kaminer described the September 11 attacks as a "faith-based initiative." The War on Terror is commonly portrayed as a clash of competing extremisms, with Christian extremists on the one side and Muslim extremists on the other. Sam Harris frets that "we are, even now, killing ourselves over ancient literature."

For atheists, the solution is to weaken the power of religion worldwide and to drive religion from the public sphere so that it can no longer influence public policy. A secular world, in this view, would be a safer and more peaceful world. Philosopher Richard Rorty proclaimed religious belief "politically dangerous" and declared atheism the only practical basis for a "pluralistic, democratic society." These ideas resonate quite broadly in Western culture today.

One may think that atheism—based as it is on a rejection or negation of God—would be devoid of a philosophy or worldview of its own. Historically it would be virtually impossible to outline anything resembling an atheist doctrine. Today, however, there are common themes that taken together amount to a kind of atheist ideology. We hear hints of this ideology when Dawkins writes of "the feeling of awed wonder that science can give us" as "one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable." There is almost a religious sensibility here, but it is framed in secular terms. Consider Carl Sagan's self-proclaimed manifesto, "Better by far to embrace the hard truth than a reassuring fable." This is a statement not of fact but of ethics, a dedication to manly honesty over wishful fantasy, an affirmation of what one ought to believe and on what basis. Strange though it may seem, the best way to understand this ideology is to consult the most villainous

character in the Christian story.

The Christian villain, Satan, has now become the atheist hero. Consider Milton's *Paradise Lost*. There Satan is portrayed as a lonely, intrepid figure, deprived of cosmic hope, abandoned to his own wits, navigating his way through the heavens, pitting himself against the unknown, refusing to accept the tyrannical sovereignty of God, rebelling against divine decree, and determined to build out of his own resources a rival empire devoted to happiness in the here and now "What though the field be lost, all is not lost, the unconquerable will, and study of revenge, immortal hate, and courage never to submit or yield." This is the independence to which contemporary atheists aspire. As Rorty put it, "It is a matter of forgetting about eternity." E. O. Wilson writes, "We can be proud as a species because, having discovered that we are alone, we owe the gods very little."

Modern atheists view themselves as brave pioneers, facing the truths of man's lowly origins and the fact of death with heroic acceptance. They profess to be guided not by blind faith but by the bright (though not infallible) flame of reason. They derive their morality not from external commandments but from an inwardly generated calculus of costs and benefits. Setting aside hopes for eternity, they are dedicated to the welfare of mankind. Science is their watchword, and its practical achievements are the only "miracles" they are willing to countenance. It is an impressive vision, and in the rest of this book I will examine it carefully to see how much sense it makes of our world and whether it can enrich our lives.