

OBJECTING TO GOD

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
1 Of human bondage	I
2 God unlimited	35
3 How to reason if you must	64
4 The well-tempered universe	91
5 What does it all mean?	114
6 Moral equilibrium	136
7 What is life without Thee?	171
8 It necessarily ain't so	194
<i>Bibliography</i>	211
<i>Index</i>	217

CHAPTER I

Of human bondage

‘Thy will be done.’

I. THE PERILS OF PROPHECY

That the faith of his forebears had passed the flood-tide was sensed with apprehension by the Victorian poet and critic Matthew Arnold, who developed the metaphor in some of the most beautifully elegiac lines in the English poetic canon:

Listen! You hear the grating roar,
Of pebbles which the waves draw back and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore,
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.¹

Coincidentally, in the very same year (1867) that Arnold was posting the decline of one millennial faith, another was born: Karl Marx, a second Messiah promising salvation to the poor and powerless, published *Das Kapital*. As did his illustrious predecessor (or more precisely his predecessor's apostles), Marx also foretold that a final apocalypse would precede

¹ Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach' in *Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1923).

mankind's rebirth into a new world. Marx's was, of course, purely terrestrial, a cooperative of mortal men and women. His apocalypse, once it had commenced, in 1917 in Russia, became one of terror, persecution and death.

But capitalism inconsiderately failed to heed Marx's prognosis and succumb to its internal contradictions. On the contrary, it still seems to be in rude health, and paradoxically at its most exuberant in one of the few countries where Marxism remains part of official dogma, thriving under the benign gaze of the Chinese Communist Party. Arnold's threnody was also at best premature. Whether he would have liked its modern manifestations or not (and I strongly suspect that the author of *Culture and Anarchy* would not), religious faith is resurgent throughout the world, not only in the areas peripheral to western culture but in its heartland: it is probably political suicide for a presidential candidate in the United States to allow any doubt that he or she is a Believer. It is also in the process of effectively immunising itself from criticism: to engage religion in critical debate is suicidal in several countries, verges on illegality in others, and has now been condemned by no less a body than the United Nations. In March 2009 the UN passed a resolution, 62/154, 'Combating the Defamation of Religion', urging member states to limit by law any expression of opinion which is not respectful to religion(s).² The resolution specifically seeks to protect Islam from criticism (paragraph 5), but officially all religions are in its scope.

Publication of this book would arguably be illegal in any country which incorporated that resolution into its law. Fortunately only Security Council resolutions are binding on member states, but UK law already seems to go quite a long way in the direction intended by the authors of 62/154, to judge by what happened to a pair of innocent hotel-proprietors recently in Britain. I quote a newspaper report of what happened after a complaint to police in the UK by a Muslim woman who, while staying at a hotel in Liverpool, engaged in a conversation with the hoteliers about their respective faiths:

It is understood that among the topics debated was whether Jesus was a minor prophet, as Islam teaches, or whether he was the Son of God, as Christianity teaches. Among the things Mr Vogelenzang, 53, is alleged to have said is that

² Article 9 of the text 'stresses the need to effectively combat defamation of all religions' (but singles out Islam for particular mention). Article 10 'Emphasises that everyone has . . . the right to freedom of expression [but] the exercise of [that] right . . . may therefore be subject to limitations as are provided for by law and are necessary for [among other things] respect for religions and beliefs.'

Mohammed was a warlord. His wife, 54, is said to have stated that Muslim dress is a form of bondage for women. The conversation, on March 20 [2009], was reported by the woman to Merseyside Police.³

The hoteliers were duly charged with a criminal offence under the Public Order Act of 1986 and the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998. The case went to court and was summarily thrown out by the judge. The Crown Prosecution Service nevertheless insisted that it had acted in the public interest in bringing criminal charges against the hoteliers, who have since been forced to sell their once-flourishing business. In dismissing the case, the judge remarked that it was probably wise not to discuss religion in public.

2. NEW ATHEISM

Adding to the protective cordon of criminal law is a large cohort of *bien-pensants* who think that any vigorous criticism of religion is distasteful and somehow unworthy: 'not quite cricket', as the British colloquialism puts it. A recent focus of their displeasure⁴ has been Richard Dawkins's best-selling book, *The God Delusion*. Though written by a distinguished scientist whose ideas have been seminal, who occupies an endowed Chair at one of the UK's leading universities, and whose seriousness of purpose can hardly be in doubt, the book is frequently described as 'rant' in the journalism of the UK and North America,⁵ and Dawkins-bashing has transcended its national boundaries to become something of an international blood-sport.

But if Dawkins offends against what is regarded as good taste, his Fourth-Estate detractors need even fewer lessons in the art. In an article in the British daily newspaper *The Times* on 16 November 2009, Dawkins is referred to as a 'fundamentalist atheist', while in the London *Evening Standard* on 31 August 2010, a columnist called Rosamund Urwin wrote: 'Dawkins and his ilk make no attempt to engage or debate: they simply seem to enjoy castigating and poking fun.' Even a cursory inspection of

³ *Sunday Telegraph*, 19 September 2009. The British press has developed an obsession with age, and it is now *de rigueur* to state the age of anyone mentioned in a newspaper report.

⁴ An even more recent one is Stephen Hawking, whom Baroness Greenfield accused of displaying a 'Taliban-like' presumption of omniscience when he merely commented that physics no longer needs God (*Daily Telegraph*, 8 September 2010).

⁵ The scientists are naturally a different matter. The eminent evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers wrote the Foreword to *The Selfish Gene* (and generously pointed out that Dawkins corrected a mistake that he, Trivers, had made). A recent tribute to the fertility of Dawkins's ideas comes from the distinguished physicist Leonard Susskind, in *The Cosmic Landscape* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2006), p. 344.

Dawkins's activities would have shown this to be false. I have seen and heard Dawkins debate several times, and on each of those occasions he was measured and rational. Ms Urwin's sally seems to be an example of what psychoanalysts call *transference*: the imputing to others of one's own deficiencies.

One might feel entitled to expect a somewhat higher standard from academics. And one might be disappointed. The following passage appeared in a newspaper book-review by John Gray, Emeritus Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics:

Just like the monotheists they obsessively attack, Dawkins and his followers believe that consciousness makes humans categorically different from their animal kin. To be sure, these ideologues insist (they always insist) that consciousness emerged without any kind of supernatural invention. Now that consciousness has appeared among humans they – or at least the most advanced members of the species, the self-styled 'brights' as Dawkins and his followers describe themselves – can master the blind forces of evolution.⁶

It is not entirely clear what that last sentence is intended to mean. But here, for the record, is what Dawkins said about consciousness in the book that propelled him to popular fame, *The Selfish Gene*:

When we watch an animal 'searching' for food, or for a mate, or for a lost child, we can hardly help imputing to it some of the subjective feelings we ourselves experience when we search. . . . Each one of us knows, from the evidence of his own introspection, that, at least in one survival machine, this purposiveness has evolved the property we call 'consciousness'. I am not philosopher enough to discuss what this means. . . .⁷

And here is something more recent:

we don't know which animals are conscious. We don't actually, technically, even know that any other human being is conscious. We just each of us know that we ourselves are conscious. We infer on pretty good grounds that other people are conscious, and it's the same sort of grounds that lead us to infer that probably chimpanzees are conscious and probably dogs are conscious.⁸

Thus is a very distinguished thinker mocked, judged and – metaphorically – crucified by an academic for whom a lively canard trumps the truth. Dawkins may be something of a latter-day Darwin's bulldog – as Darwin's

⁶ Review of Marilynne Robinson, *Matters of the Mind*, *Toronto Globe and Mail*, 21 May 2010.

⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 30th Anniversary edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 53.

⁸ From a recorded interview, 21 October 2009.

great Victorian defender, T. H. Huxley, called himself – but like Huxley himself he is a scientist and a tireless and gifted campaigner on behalf of an increased public understanding of science. Ironically, the main charge against him that is not entirely polemical is that his assault on religion goes well beyond what science and the standards of scientific reasoning justify: in particular, that he has not bothered to understand enough about what he is attacking. I myself think that Dawkins understands quite enough to form a reasoned and – as far as I am concerned – entirely convincing judgment. I hold no brief for him, however, and later I will argue that some of his own arguments are radically unsound, including the centrepiece-argument of *The God Delusion*.

Another cause of the widespread resistance to Dawkins's philippic is what is seen as a particularly intransigent way in which he and the 'new atheists', as they are called,⁹ state their case. Religion is still so respectably entrenched even in western liberal societies that any overtly critical assault is regarded as suspect. Many people will never be convinced however good the arguments, because arguments in themselves have only a very limited power to persuade; but it would anyway be very surprising if a belief-system that has been so dominant politically, socially and spiritually for nearly two thousand years, and still exercises a powerful hold on billions of minds, would yield either suddenly or easily. Many people – myself among them – believe that the intellectual case against God was actually made over two-and-a-half centuries ago, by the Scottish philosopher David Hume – of whom more later – in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.¹⁰ Others have made the case for themselves without Hume's assistance. But to little avail: God is showing no inclination to quit the scene. Indeed, the number of adherents of two of the three big monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam, has increased roughly in step with the increase in the world's population and each of them numbers more than a billion followers, and they are still growing, Islam very rapidly. And of course there are many more religions than just these. Hinduism also numbers many millions, so does Buddhism, while if a count were taken of all those who follow one

⁹ This intellectually distinguished group includes, in addition to Dawkins himself, the particle physicist Victor Stenger, the chemist Peter Atkins, the neuroscientist Sam Harris, the philosophers Daniel Dennett and Michel Onfray, the mathematician Piergiorgio Odifreddi and the writer and journalist Christopher Hitchens. If I have omitted anyone of note I apologise.

¹⁰ Paul Davies notes that this remarkable work even contains the first suggestion that we might inhabit a multiverse (*The Goldilocks Enigma: Why is the Universe Just Right for Life?* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), p. 96).

or other of the active religions that currently exist it would amount to a sizable proportion of the world's population.

3. GOD OF OUR FATHERS

The anthropologist Pascal Boyer, in his book *Religion Explained*, makes a plausible case that religions arise and persist because they answer a variety of human needs, emotional and intellectual. Because the needs persist so does religion, even when it is assailed by what might seem to the scientific mind to be overwhelmingly adverse evidence. Unfortunately, the way it accommodates those needs has often come with a considerable cost, sometimes highly visible, sometimes more insidious. I know of no reliable record of the number of lives lost, to say nothing of serious physical and mental injuries also sustained, on behalf of some of the world's principal religions, but to put it at several million is probably not an overestimate.

Not all religions are inherently toxic, and there is no doubt that some of the violence perpetrated in religion's name is often mixed with more worldly causes. But by no means all of it. Though they may not all contribute in a significant way to violence and intolerance, some religions, unfortunately those with large world followings, nevertheless have a special mix of ingredients which predisposes them strongly in that direction. Foremost among them are the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The ingredients are set out in the foundational narrative those religions share: an absolutist morality based on the command of an all-powerful creator of heaven and earth, better known as God. God will tolerate no disobedience or any challenge to, or even *doubt* about, his authority. God needs no informers and secret police to inform him of even contemplated deviance,¹¹ because he knows every detail of your thoughts ('I know that thou canst do everything, and that no thought can be withholden from thee', conceded Job,¹² after being treated to a first-hand recital of God's limitless powers). Against God's verdict there is no appeal, and his punishments and rewards are so extreme that one of Europe's foremost mathematicians, Blaise Pascal, who was also a Christian mystic, claimed that only mathematical infinity could represent their magnitude.¹³ Even the New Testament, though incorporating the Sermon on the Mount, is not without hints, and sometimes

¹¹ It is entirely appropriate if this observation brings Stalin to mind. Stalin had personality traits very similar to those of the Old Testament God.

¹² 42:2.

¹³ Pascal developed a famous prudential argument for belief in God based on that 'number' which we shall look at more closely in [Chapter 3](#).

more than hints, of the older methods of persuasion. There is gentle Jesus, the Lamb of God, threatening eternal damnation to the wicked ('Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire'¹⁴), and his apostle – and some claim dearest disciple – St John the Divine condemning the merely 'fearful and unbelieving' to Hell.¹⁵ The New Testament signally failed to temper the ferocity of the Counter-Reformation, and atheism could be punished by death even in eighteenth-century England and Scotland.

The extremity of God's enduring wrath is dramatically illustrated in the story of the Fall in Genesis: for a single act of disobedience Adam and Eve were driven out of Eden and the stigma of sin stamped on all their posterity, together with the certainty of – to hijack some famous words of the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes – a life nasty, brutish and short. The regime pictured in this piece of sacred mythopoeia is a *totalitarianism*, but a totalitarianism more thoroughgoing than any earth can offer, even Stalin's, with no detail of quotidian life or thought escaping the attention of a punitive God.¹⁶ But it is not just a fear-inspiring totalitarianism. If it were it would not have exerted the peculiar attachment that it has done and continues to do. Its grip on the human psyche is arguably as powerful as it is because, in a beautifully Orwellian turn, between the beatings (remember that mankind is inherently sinful), God professes to love his people, asking for their love and worship in return. According to Christianity, he even sacrificed his own son to mitigate the savage punishment he had meted out to the whole of humanity for the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Beaten wives, tortured prisoners, unhappy victims of systematic bullying, can all attest to the peculiar psychological efficaciousness of this sort of equivocal treatment. I said 'Orwellian' because whether George Orwell intended it or not (and it is very difficult to believe that he didn't), his chilling novel *1984* reads as an allegory of the Inquisition, with God the invisible Big Brother and O'Brien, the friend-turned-inquisitor and torturer, a latter-day Torquemada. At the end of the novel Winston Smith, a broken man, has learned to love Big Brother.¹⁷

¹⁴ Matthew 25:41.

¹⁵ Revelation 21:8. Together with 'the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolators, and all liars', these sinners will 'have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death'. The Koran employs a similar rhetoric of hatred in consigning unbelievers to the same fate.

¹⁶ A contemporary Muslim philosopher, Abdennour Bidar, has actually had the considerable courage to describe Islam as totalitarian – 'archaic, violent and totalitarian' ('La lapidation, preuve extrême de la logique de violence de l'Islam', *Le Monde*, 31 August 2010). Totalitarian *all* the Abrahamic religions are, not just Islam.

¹⁷ One of the Jewish prisoners who survived Auschwitz, rabbi Hugo Gryn, said that when he once broke down weeping he believed that God was also crying. Then, Gryn reported, 'I seemed to

This highly potent mix of foundational doctrine is stiffened with the addition of the claim of the two proselytising religions, Christianity and Islam, that they represent God's law for all mankind, giving themselves licence to convert disbelievers – and each other – and if necessary to wage holy war. Torah, Bible and Koran, and their accompanying commentaries and additions, all claim to be literally God's truth, but unfortunately they are mutually contradictory. All the ingredients are now here for a recipe for discord, intolerance and the infliction of suffering. The possibility of inviting God's displeasure becomes an issue of concern even for those whose personal loyalty is unquestioned but who are anxious not to be seen to be condoning dissent, or corrupting his Word. Theologians, employed to determine exactly what that word is, often led hazardous lives and some still do. Arius, an Alexandrian priest of the third and fourth centuries CE, achieved theological notoriety for claiming that God and Jesus were not of the same essence, but he was merely anathematised and exiled for his heresy and subsequently readmitted to the fold (at which point he dramatically died). Many centuries later, under the Inquisition, the penalty for heresy was death, after torture. It was a remedy widely copied. William Tyndale, the sixteenth-century Protestant scholar who gave us the first English translation of the New Testament, and parts of the Old, from the Greek and Hebrew originals was condemned and executed by being strangled and then burned.

You might object that no mere collection of myths or texts by itself amounts to totalitarianism. *People* make totalitarianisms. That is true, but people can easily be roused to the noblest of actions, and also to the most depraved, by 'mere' writings. A book on economics written in the second half of the nineteenth century inspired not one but several earthly totalitarianisms, more than one of which still thrives. The crucial factor which causes an otherwise inert collection of myths and texts to become potent is, of course, *belief*. The most nightmarish of fairy stories will remain fairy stories if they are not believed, as the bizarre but harmless rituals of Halloween bear witness. We are talking about active *belief*-systems, and the sacred scriptures of the three monotheisms, plus the extensive bodies of theology accompanying them, currently support the beliefs of billions of people, inspiring them in various places and times (which unfortunately

be granted a curious inner peace . . . I found God' (*Chasing Shadows* (London: Allen Lane, 2001)). Note that this occurred on the day that Jews atone to God. In making the comparison with Orwell's novel I do not in any way intend to belittle the ineffable enormity of what Gryn and others went through in the death camps.

include the present) to recreate God's totalitarianism on earth, under the proxy-governance of priests.

4. CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

Though often sharing the opinion of atheists and agnostics ancient and modern that those beliefs are very probably untrue and the regimes based on them repugnant, the *bien-pensants* still manage to disapprove strongly of vigorous frontal assaults on them. They may or may not be true, a typical objection runs, but what virtue is there in trying to destroy the faith of billions of people together with the inspiration those beliefs provide to do good, help the weak and sick, etc.? Why not tolerate the edifice of faith as one more, and probably the most powerful, support of public morality and social benefit? Judged in terms of its practical outcomes – for example in the extensive charity work undertaken by religious organisations – religious belief is on record as having promoted and continuing to promote a great deal of good, while in basing itself on the presumed love of God it is the least likely to promote harm. Admittedly, there is the regrettable fact that from time to time there are outbreaks of religious intolerance, with violence at the extreme, but given time, increasing education and 'globalisation' will hopefully cause them, if not to disappear entirely, at least be marginalised and contained.

It's a reassuring story. It may even be true in the long-enough run. But it is not true now, nor in the near future. Quite the contrary: we are witnessing a marked and rapidly increasing renewal of religious intolerance, sometimes very violent and always drawing its inspiration from holy scripture. Even in formerly tranquil areas of the world security services work day and night to prevent what has every appearance of being Islamic-inspired terrorism from following up the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York, the Madrid and London bombings and the guerrilla attack in Mumbai, with new attempts to turn the world into a single Islamic state. Faisal Shahzad, a US citizen, condemned to life-imprisonment in October 2010 for attempting to detonate a car-bomb in Times Square, warned the court: 'Brace yourselves, the war with the Muslims has just begun', adding generously 'If I'm given 1,000 lives I will sacrifice them all for Allah.'

The same uncompromising message is conveyed on the numerous jihadist websites urging believers everywhere to enlist in the war against the enemies of Allah, with the Koran and hadiths cited in support. In the so-called 'sword verse' (9:5) of the Koran, the Prophet appears to include

murder in his God's list of punishments of idolaters once the four 'forbidden months' are over. Sura 5:33's tone is equally menacing:

Those who wage war against God and his Messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land should be punished by death, crucifixion, the amputation of an alternate hand and foot, or banishment from the land: a disgrace for them in this world, and then a terrible punishment in the Hereafter, unless they repent before you overpower them – in that case bear in mind that God is forgiving and merciful.¹⁸

Such passages are frequently glossed over by modern Muslim editors, who cite the contemporary context of local wars against specific opponents. That is all very well, but the Koran is nevertheless regarded by all Muslims as the unedited word of God valid for all times and all places, and it seethes with hatred of unbelievers, expressing God's loathing in language of graphic violence.

This is not to deny the (undeniable) fact that there is a large social and political dimension to the current wave of Islamic violence. A powerful source of grievance was undoubtedly the implantation of Israel into Palestine and its subsequent support by some western countries and particularly the United States. The recent invasion of a sovereign Muslim state, Iraq, by a coalition of western countries, on what even then were clearly trumped-up charges, simply added fuel to the fire.¹⁹ Traditional Muslim societies also see themselves threatened by a secularism widely thought to be promoted by western countries, which is not only a threat to their religion as such but also to the social structures it supports and sanctifies. It hardly needs saying that those who benefit most from the distribution of offices and influence traditionally 'due' to them do not generally welcome the invasion of an alien culture threatening those privileges. Men certainly enjoy great power over women in traditional Muslim societies and the sexual privileges that go with it. But to see religion itself as causally innocent in the current wave of religious violence is simply a refusal to face reality.²⁰ Many Muslims among the world's one and a half billion see their shared religion as their ultimate loyalty, and it is the fact that it is *Muslim* territories that are being threatened, invaded and more generally desecrated by the West that is at the heart of the militancy. Osama bin Laden's dramatic communiqués are peppered with minatory quotations from the Koran, and I think that one can reasonably assume that he believes that he is conveying the will of God.

¹⁸ The highly conditional nature of God's mercy is common to all three monotheisms.

¹⁹ It was on the basis of similarly trumped-up charges that Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia in 1938, and forged Britain's and France's determination to resist any further invasion. The result was the Second World War.

²⁰ This point is made forcefully in Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Nomad* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2010).

Hezbollah, the paramilitary Islamic organisation in Lebanon, supported by among others the theocracy in Iran, is the 'Party of God', its website announcing that 'we are an ummah [Muslim community] linked to the Muslims of the whole world by the solid doctrine and religious connection of Islam'.

But Islam isn't the only culprit. Far from it. Christianity in its time has been responsible for much greater destruction, persecution and death. It might conceivably be again, for fundamentalism is once more on the march as far as all three religions are concerned. Every day American Christian TV stations spew out bilious condemnation of evolutionary theory, atheism, homosexuality, abortion, same-sex marriage, 'liberalism', etc. The Christian apologist William Lane Craig argues that the Canaanites, slaughtered man, woman and child by the Israelites on the instructions of God, were irremediably wicked and that God had already held off 400 years from punishing them as they deserved: 'Israel was merely the instrument of his justice', he observes.²¹ Many unhappy Christians still see God's commands all too regularly flouted, so unhappy that

[i]f push comes to shove, some of them are prepared to lie and even to kill, to do whatever it takes to help bring what they consider celestial justice to those they consider the sinners.²²

The killing started in the 1990s, with a spate of murders of doctors in America and Canada who performed abortions. After being sentenced to life imprisonment, one of those convicted, Scott Roeder, observed that God's judgment 'will sweep over this land [the United States] like a prairie wind'.

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?²³

What rough beast indeed?

5. APOSTASY, WOMEN AND OTHER PROBLEMS

There is one large difference between the older outbursts of religious intolerance and the intolerance of contemporary fundamentalism: the principal enemy has ceased to be a different religion or doctrinal differences within a

²¹ W. L. Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd edn (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008). 'Reasonable'?

²² Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2006), p. 338. Dennett is specifically referring to the religious right in America.

²³ W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming'.

religion, and has now mostly become the lack of any religious belief at all. Secularism, decadence, blasphemy, profanity: the work of Satan is being performed daily in full view of the faithful and, even worse, often carried out in holy places, and – as many see it – is deliberately seeking to subvert the faith. Drawing nourishment from its primitive roots, resurgent fundamentalism has in its sights the ideals of tolerance, equality between men and women, freedom of expression and thought and the freedom to reject religion, not just one religion but any at all. In parts of the United States exercising that last freedom too publicly can put you in danger of your life, while in several of the jurisdictions incorporating sharia law, including Iran, the rejection of Islam is punishable by death.²⁴ In September 2008, with a majority of 196–7, the Iranian Parliament extended the death penalty to any Iranian male who renounces Islam; apostate Iranian women were more fortunate, at least in this respect, inviting only a life sentence.²⁵

Sharia law is implemented in different ways in different places, some more lenient than others. In some the penalty for adultery is a fixed number of lashes of the whip, the number laid down in the Koran. In others it is death by stoning. The Associated Press reported on 18 November 2009 that in Somalia a woman had been stoned to death in front of 200 onlookers, after being sentenced to death for adultery by a local sharia court. A woman in Iran recently escaped the same fate, but only after a concerted campaign in the western media. In general women have inferior status in Islam. Muslim women can only marry Muslim men, but Muslim men can marry any of the ‘People of the Book’ (i.e. Muslims, Christians and Jews; ‘the Book’ is the body of scripture common to all). Women’s testimony in courts is weighed at one half that of men. The Koran authorises a man to strike his wife if he merely suspects her of undermining his authority (4:24). In the hadith literature the Prophet is reported as saying that a woman has to agree to her husband’s request for sex whatever she may be doing, or however she may feel. The President of the Sharia Council of Britain recently stated (14 October 2010) that rape in marriage is not recognised in sharia law.

Women who oppose the teachings of the Koran and Sunna on the status and role of women have been reviled in mass demonstrations and threatened with execution in those countries where it is strictly observed. And not only in those. Western countries now harbour substantial numbers of Muslims, some of whom (usually males) also strongly resent ‘their’ women

²⁴ Hadith 260 of Sahih Bukhari is invoked: ‘The Prophet said “If somebody (a Muslim) discards his religion then kill him.”’

²⁵ The right to freedom of religion is an article (Article 23) of Iran’s constitution.

failing to play their traditional role, particularly where dress and marriage are concerned (and I think one does not need to add, sexual orientation). Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who repudiated Islam and wrote the screenplay for a provocative film with the Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh on the status of women under Islam, has lived with death-threats ever since. Van Gogh was murdered for his pains, though the murderer took care to indicate that Ali was the principal offender. The dissident poet and writer Taslima Nasrin has been forced into exile after being expelled from Bangladesh, and remains under constant threat of death. She is about to be expelled now from India, her temporary refuge, after prolonged and violent protests by Indian Muslims.

Christianity and Judaism also contain more than a strain of misogyny. A Jewish prayer recited by Orthodox men is 'Praised be God for not creating me a Gentile. Praised be God for not creating me a slave. Praised be God for not creating me a woman.' The apostle Paul told wives to 'be in subjection' to their husbands,²⁶ and issued the following injunction to the Corinthians:

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak: but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for the women to speak in the church.²⁷

Paul's words still have plangent echoes. The Reverend Angus MacLeay, a member of the General Synod of the Church of England, issued a letter to parishioners citing Biblical authority for demanding that women 'submit to their husbands in everything'.²⁸ Priests in the Catholic Church are of course male and celibate: the nearer to women, the farther from God. Christ had no female disciples so, by impeccable logic, there can be no women priests. Once the possibility of ordaining women became a serious issue in the Church of England, 'traditionalist' brethren have been decamping in droves to Rome where this important point of principle remains observed.

The God of Abraham is notoriously a principled homophobe, and indulgence in homosexual behaviour is duly deplored as one of the gravest sins by the main branches of the monotheisms. The condition, for want of a better word, is increasingly recognised as something some people can't help. But what if they could? What is wrong with that? If like mine your answer is 'nothing', you contradict the word of God, and homosexuals are in more or less grave danger wherever fundamentalism is rooted. In possibly jocular

²⁶ 1 Peter 3:1.

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 14:34.

²⁸ Reported in the *Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 2010.

vein the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad remarked that there were no homosexuals in Iran. That is because in Iran homosexuality is punishable by death (it is estimated that 4,000 people have been executed for this reason since 1979), as it is also in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Mauritania and Sudan. Homosexual feelings may be just a 'disorder' according to modern Catholic doctrine, but engaging in homosexual acts remains a grievous sin. With the weight of religious authority behind it, it is small wonder that homophobia remains such a potent force even in 'liberal' western societies, let alone Muslim ones. Same-sex marriage also gets a strong thumbs-down, implicitly defying as it does the 'fact' that according to God the purpose of marriage is procreation. Recreational sex ('fornication') is condemned for a similar reason. It is also the most widely broken of God's laws by the devout. From the point of view of the principle of individual autonomy, choosing to abstain from or engage in any of these activities is the business of no-one but the individual or individuals concerned. But that principle is of course emphatically denied in God's universe.

While all the Abrahamic religions remain a potential, and sometimes actual, threat to human freedom, Islam exceeds the other two in menace because not only is freedom of expression when it comes to religion usually strongly proscribed in Islamic jurisdictions, but it is punished in some with a degree of savagery that is almost unthinkable in liberal societies. In Pakistan and some other Muslim countries the death penalty can be imposed for blasphemy; at the time of writing a Christian woman in Pakistan is under sentence of death for allegedly defaming the Prophet. Nor is the threat confined. Muslim *fatwabs* are issued against authors and publishers of offending material wherever they may be domiciled, and also to those in the electronic media who broadcast it. The worldwide riots after the publication in 2007 of cartoons of the Prophet in a Danish newspaper were a coordinated Muslim response, as was the excoriation of Salman Rushdie, sentenced to death by the Ayatollah Khomeini for the crime of – *writing a satirical novel!*

The fact that people in non-Muslim countries are under a very genuine threat to their lives because they have infringed a Muslim religious taboo quite understandably sends shivers up many people's spines. Some western religious 'leaders' do of course lament the fact that their own congregations seem to display less enthusiasm for taking the Word of God to heart. The rest of us can only feel lucky to be where we are. The liberal countries have slowly and often painfully constructed over the years legal and moral systems guaranteeing, or so it seemed, the freedom of the individual to

express his or her views, subject to certain relatively mild conditions. Sadly, that freedom is now being eroded by fear: the signs are all around us in cancelled meetings, films, TV documentaries, book-contracts, even the readers' comments sections in some newspapers. UN Resolution 62/154 is just the latest in the accumulating threat to hard-won liberties.

6. EDUCATION FOR BELIEVERS

A striking and at first sight puzzling fact is that several of the Muslims convicted of terrorism are far from poorly educated, having university degrees, and sometimes higher degrees, in engineering, the sciences and even medicine. What, it may well be asked, is a healer of the sick doing trying to kill and maim thousands of people? There is however a profound sense in which those educational accomplishments by themselves do *not* amount to an education, if we understand by that word not only the inculcation of factual knowledge but also the development of an impartial critical faculty. There is an old joke that the ancient Greeks knew a lot about knowing but didn't know much about anything else. This is funny but untrue. With meagre technology by today's standards, and starting from a low baseline, they made enormous strides: they knew that the earth was roughly spherical, and even measured its diameter; they knew that the moon was not a source of illumination in its own right but merely reflected sunlight; and they came to within an epsilon, so to speak, of inventing the calculus. But above all they were the first in recorded history to undertake a systematic investigation of logic, the theory of valid reasoning itself, and to construct mathematics and to some extent other disciplines on a systematic deductive basis where the *justification* of each claim was transparent.

Cultivating a critical and enquiring attitude was a central part of their conception of understanding, as it should be of ours. And the biggest impediment to that is indoctrination into the belief that a higher, infallible 'knowledge' is revealed by scripture and its officially accredited interpreters. For too many, Jew, Christian and Muslim alike, suitably authenticated religious dogma trumps a critical, evidence-based evaluation, and where such an evaluation is in any tension at all with dogma it is to be condemned not merely as false but dangerously false. It was through eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge that Adam and Eve were dispatched from Paradise, and the condemnation of free thought that in any way threatens the authority of scripture remains undiminished in Islam and Catholicism. Though the Catholic Index of Proscribed Books now lacks ecclesiastical enforcement, it remains as a 'moral force', as the current Pope (then Cardinal

Ratzinger) insisted in a letter in 1985 to Cardinal Giuseppe Siri. Among the authors whose works are on the index are such distinguished scientists, mathematicians and philosophers as Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Francis Bacon, Descartes, Kant, Hume, Berkeley, Locke, d'Alembert, J. S. Mill and Comte. One can only infer that for Ratzinger these authors are a moral danger because they represent *par excellence* the spirit of free, dispassionate enquiry.

The theory of evolution remains a proscribed theory for many Jews, Christians and Muslims, who refuse to have it taught to their children because it conflicts with the assertion of Torah, Bible and Koran that humanity was a special act of creation by God.²⁹ And so we have the apparent paradox of highly trained healers manufacturing bombs to kill and maim enemies of Islam. But it is no paradox: knowledge that in most western democracies is, at any rate officially, held to be an end in itself is for others merely a technical instrument subservient to the demands of religion. The Islamic theocracy in Iran has recently proscribed the teaching of philosophy, together with other humanities subjects, in Iranian universities: 'such teachings will lead to the dissemination of doubt in the foundations of religious teachings', Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is reported as saying.³⁰

7. THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING SELECTIVE

It is of course a familiar tactic of religious apologists, confronted with the many inflammatory, unpleasant or simply absurd claims and exhortations to be found in their respective bodies of sacred writings, to urge a non-literal reading of them. They are metaphorical, or they are taken out of context (as it has been claimed that 9:5 of the Koran was a specific order in a particular time of war), or they incorporate mythic or allegorical features which are taken literally only by the ignorant or in a spirit of *parti pris*, or . . . (one could go on for quite a long time). It is quite usual for more liberal imams, appalled by yet more suicide bombings, or by the stoning to death of women convicted of adultery, to claim that such actions lack textual authority.

Most educated Christians probably reject a literal interpretation of that story, though amazingly forty-five per cent of the citizens of the US do not,

²⁹ It took the Catholic Church a century and a half to accept it. Nidhal Guessoum, Professor of Physics and Astronomy at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, recently estimated that only fifteen per cent or so of people in Tunisia, Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey and Malaysia believe that the theory is true.

³⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 2010.

and believe that God created human beings 10,000 years ago. The claim that the earth is fixed and that the sun moves is made in several places in the Bible (e.g. Psalms 93:1 and 104:5), and Galileo's apparent denial of it in the heyday of militant Christianity notoriously brought him into open conflict with the Roman Catholic Church, to his extreme peril (he was lucky to escape with his life). But in our own perforce mellow times Francis Collins, a geneticist and ex-Head of the Human Genome Project in Washington, together with many other committed Christians denies that there was any genuine conflict of claims:

The claims that heliocentricity contradicted the Bible are now seen to have been overstated, and the insistence on a literal interpretation of those particular scripture verses seems wholly unwarranted.³¹

It is of course rather easy to disclaim responsibility for awkward facts in this cavalier way. The claims that heliocentricity contradicted the Bible certainly weren't 'seen to have been overstated' during the long deliberations that preceded Galileo's arraignment, and Collins's verdict that the literal interpretation 'seems wholly unwarranted' is made at a safe temporal distance from the contemporary events, and with the hindsight afforded by a more reliable source of knowledge. But for the committed believer there is of course no alternative to such bland dismissals of what previous generations of believers had taken for granted. The fact is that many of the passages in sacred literature are unacceptable to a contemporary readership because they are rather obviously the production of primitive, pre-scientific societies. As a consequence many are in conflict with liberal codes of conduct and law. In many jurisdictions that does not matter so much because those codes are dominant and enforced by the state, but there are some jurisdictions, like Iran, that have deliberately regressed to a primitive state, and some that have never emerged from it.

It is an ironically convenient fact that the multitude of contradictory claims in all the sacred books implies that there simply has to be selectivity unless one is to dismiss most of it out of hand. The Old Testament has inconsistencies liberally scattered throughout its length, while the New Testament is a veritable tissue of them, with its various books contradicting not only each other but each itself. Despite the claim (of the Koran!) that because the Koran is all true, being the unedited word of God himself, it must be consistent (4:82), it is nevertheless a frequent occurrence for something to be stated without qualification on one page and denied on

³¹ Francis Collins, *The Language of God* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 156.

another.³² All these texts are luxuriously inconsistent: God is all merciful, God is implacable; God loves us, God dislikes us so much that His only Son, Jesus Christ, had to die for our sake before God would consider changing His mind. And so on.

This sort of pick'n'mix policy may be practically workable, at least temporarily, and leave more sophisticated votaries free to reject the excesses of a primitive morality reflecting the harshness of the desert in which it was born. But nobody outside the ranks of the faithful, or even within for that matter, should believe that this represents a satisfactory state of affairs. In the first place, there is an issue of elementary logic. The conjunction 'A and B' of two assertions A and B logically implies each of A and B, even if B happens to be the negation of A. If God demands that his followers punish dissidents and unbelievers with all force, and then states that the dissidents and unbelievers are to be shown mercy, it still follows that he has demanded that his followers punish dissidents with all force, and those who find the idea congenial certainly have logic on their side when they appeal to scriptural authority for such action. An infamous *fatwa* issued by the fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Taymiyya, declaring that all those not adhering to classical Islamic law could be killed, is invoked by Osama bin Laden and other militant Muslims. Another *fatwa*, issued by the Pakistani scholar Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri in 2010, declared just the opposite, adding that terrorism is counter to Islam. *My fatwa* against your *fatwa*.

Secondly, there is an issue of moral honesty and courage. Trying to find a 'nice' bit of the Koran, or the Bible, to counter a nasty one, is implicitly conceding the primacy of one's own intuitive ethical judgment, but then in effect betraying it by looking for an appropriate bit of dogma to 'authorise' it. Mildly inclined Muslims, desperate to disown the bloody deeds that the radical imams enjoin pleading the authority of the Koran, can find suitably irenic quotations from the Koran to support their case that the imams do not speak for God. But the mere fact that they have to mine the Koran in this way shows that they know full well that those acts are wrong whether the Koran says they are or not. No matter: the Koran still has to say so. These people have been so schooled into thinking that it is the sole source of authority that they cannot believe in any other, including themselves. Christians and Jews of course do the same thing. *These people have lost their intellectual and moral integrity.*

³² Michel Onfray provides a long list of examples in his recent book *In Defense of Atheism: A Case against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, Jeremy Leggat (trans.) (Toronto: Viking Canada, 2007), pp. 170–4.

8. YOUR LIFE ISN'T YOUR OWN

Not even the secular totalitarianisms of Nazism or Marxism–Leninism, dreadful as they were, went so far as to claim literal ownership of one's body. Yet that is precisely what the Abrahamic monotheisms do. Human life (but only *human* life), they agree, is sacred to God, because God created it, made it in his image, and most importantly *retains ownership*. Practitioners of these religions often say that it is a gift from God, but it is not a gift in the sense in which we usually understand a gift, as a transference of ownership. That it most certainly isn't. Our lives are not our own. We are merely leaseholders – or as the Roman Catholic catechism 2280 rather daintily puts it, '*stewards*' – of lives which belong to God:

It is God who remains the Sovereign Master of Life . . . We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has *entrusted* to us (my emphasis).

St Paul gave a less nuanced interpretation of the contract:

What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost, which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?

For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.³³

'Bought with a price'! We are not only owned by God; *we are also slaves of God*. Small wonder the churches failed to condemn slavery – until sufficiently many other people did.

9. ASSISTING A CRIME

Another corollary of God's ownership of us is that suicide is a *theft* from God, while the assistor of a suicide is an accessory to the crime as well as – if you are a Christian – prejudicing the destination of the sufferer's soul. Unsurprisingly, to assist a suicide is a mortal sin in the Catholic catechism. The Church of England also vigorously opposes relaxing the UK law prohibiting assisted suicide, despite a large and stable majority (over 70%) of the population being in favour. In a telephone poll conducted by Populus Surveys in July 2009 of a random sample of 1,504 British adults, 74% were in favour of changing the law on physician-assisted suicide. But the Upper House of the UK legislature, the House of Lords, has 26 seats reserved for Church of England bishops. Despite a full awareness of the extent of

³³ 1 Corinthians 6:19–20.

the popular feeling, and the fact that regular Church of England attendees make up currently fewer than 3% of the population (with an average age of over 50),³⁴ the bishops in the Upper Chamber under the leadership of the head of the Anglican Church,³⁵ Dr Rowan Williams, have worked indefatigably in the (successful) cause of defeating every Private Members' Bill to change the law.

Rowan Williams was recently at work again, this time in concert with the Chief Rabbi and the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, opposing an amendment to a parliamentary bill which would have legalised assisting terminally ill people to travel to countries where assisted suicide is legal. A letter sent by these three dignitaries to a large-circulation daily newspaper (*Daily Telegraph*, 29 June 2009), stating their opposition, notes that a Bill asking for the legalisation of certain forms of assisted suicide was defeated in the House of Lords. It fails, however, to mention that a substantial proportion of the opposition's vote was that of bishops under the leadership of Rowan Williams. The letter notes that vulnerable people might be put at risk, but fails to mention those in terrible pain and indignity who cannot travel by themselves and the appalling dilemma in which the existing law places their friends and relatives if they choose to help them. It raises a patriotic cheer on behalf of the British hospice movement but carefully avoids saying *whose* opinion it is that dying in a hospice is a 'better' (I am quoting) option than assisted suicide: there is no evidence that it is the opinion of the dying, and it is certainly not that of the very large majority of the population in favour of assisted suicide. Notable also is the omission by Rowan Williams *et al.* to mention that assisted suicide is a mortal sin, or the equivalent of one, in their religions. *Thou shalt not kill!* One might have thought fundamental doctrine would be an important consideration for these spiritual leaders: at the very least, worth a mention. Not so, apparently. Might it be that a candid statement of doctrine would risk alienating a broader public opinion indifferent or hostile to religion? A spokesperson for the Church of England has stated that the bishops bring 'an important independent voice and spiritual insight to the work of the Upper House'.³⁶ 'Pull the other one' is the only appropriate response to that. Jonathan Sacks has told us that he

³⁴ Its substantial *ex officio* representation in the legislature makes it the last rotten borough in the UK (the 'rotten boroughs' in the nineteenth century were those which returned Members of Parliament even though their populations were a minute fraction of those of the growing cities denied parliamentary representation).

³⁵ Always the Archbishop of Canterbury. ³⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, 2 January 2010.

will continue to believe that God who created one or an infinity of universes in love and forgiveness continues to ask us to create, to love and to forgive.³⁷

Nice words from a man who wishes it to remain a criminal offence punishable by up to fourteen years in prison to help an incapacitated person to a clinic in Switzerland where they can end their lives in peace. By their fruits ye shall know them.

Shortly after Williams *et al.* penned their letter, some UK newspapers reported a local Health Authority whose staff had denied additional morphine to a man dying in terrible pain of leukaemia. The Authority reported with satisfaction that it had remained within the demands of the law, since to administer additional morphine might have shortened the man's life. What chilling indifference. In prolonging suffering to avoid a clash with the state there is little difference between what the people responsible in that case did and what those 'merely carrying out orders' did in Majdenek or Bergen-Belsen. In a recent move the Director of Public Prosecutions in the UK has relaxed the automatic charging of anyone offering any help at all – this includes merely travelling with them to an assisted suicide clinic outside the UK – to those seeking assistance in bringing about a dignified death on their own terms, and has embarked on a public consultation on the matter. The Christian Medical Fellowship, numbering over 4,000 doctors, refused to participate.

It is true that the opposition to assisted suicide extends beyond the churches. But the churches continue to muddy the waters to obscure the fact that what is at issue is a simple principle of self-determination – up to death itself. A communiqué from the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *à propos* new guidelines issued by the Director of Public Prosecutions seeking to clarify the circumstances under which the Crown would not prosecute anyone assisting a terminally ill person to end their life, states that 'it seems to imply if the victim is disabled or terminally ill, then his or her life does not merit the same degree of protection by law' (reported in the British press on 20 November 2009). The claim is preposterous: the guidelines imply no such thing.

But the propaganda machine grinds on, as it has ground on for centuries, in a way of which Goebbels himself might have been envious. Welcoming the addition to the Church of England's website of a statement of the Church's opposition to assisted suicide, the Bishop of Winchester wrote:

³⁷ *The Times*, 3 September 2010.

This is especially important as distinguished voices are suggesting that dependent sufferers are 'wasting the lives of those who care for them, and have a duty to die to stop being a burden on others'.

No attribution for those 'distinguished voices' is provided, and one might well be puzzled why they spoke in unison. Pure Goebbels. Slogans like 'the sanctity of human life', 'the precious gift of life' [but only human life], 'playing God', together with newer ones like the 'Culture of Life versus the Culture of Death', are wheeled out to do their usual service as argument-substitutes. They have achieved their apotheosis in surely one of the most ridiculous pieces of hyperbole ever produced, by Edmund Adamus, an adviser to the Archbishop of Westminster, who blamed the British Parliament for allowing the country to become 'the geopolitical epicentre of the culture of death'.³⁸ Ironically, 'The Culture of Death' is a very appropriate description of the activities of these ghoulish, dissembling clerics intent on keeping alive to the bitter end of their ordeal people who, judging by the opinion poll statistics, would rather shuffle off their mortal coils peacefully in the manner of their domestic pets. But those urbane torturers are probably aware of what another Victorian poet, Arthur Hugh Clough, wittily pointed out:

And almost everyone when age,
Disease or sorrow strikes him,
Inclines to think there is a God,
Or someone very like Him.

10. A MORAL HEALTH WARNING

Enjoying the weight of historical precedent and the respectful attention that they command almost everywhere, the churches are still widely believed to be beacons of light in a surrounding moral darkness. I hope that the preceding discussion has at least suggested that the belief is erroneous. Yet few people seem to be able to bring themselves to acknowledge how unpleasantly intolerant a good deal of the moral 'teachings' of the monotheisms actually is, rooted as it is in scripture reflecting a primitive appreciation of the world and its doings. Even in the more liberal spiritual jurisdictions of modern Christianity the churches play a major role in sustaining inhuman and illiberal laws and placing obstacles in the way of reform. In the areas of both factual enquiry and ethics they continue to play the catching-up

³⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, 1 September 2010. He seems to have forgotten that Parliament is elected by the people.

game they have been doing for centuries. They eventually give way, but only after they have caused a great deal of human damage. The Roman Catholic Church still will not acknowledge that homosexual acts are anything but sinful, contrary to Natural (i.e. God's) Law, or that contraception is not a worse sin than the production of too many people in areas of the world which cannot support existing populations, or than the spread of HIV and AIDS.

But apologists will still say – do still say – that it is all a question of *balance*. Religion, they claim, particularly Christianity, has inspired and continues to inspire a great deal of good. And it is probably true that for every religious radical prepared to bomb civilian targets³⁹ and kill unbelievers, there is someone helping to assuage the ravages of hunger and illness under the auspices of a church or religious belief. But the churches' contribution to major social reforms, like the abolition of slavery, the extension of state-funded welfare, the emancipation of women, has been very much exaggerated. St Paul himself enjoined slaves to obey their masters gladly, even bad masters,⁴⁰ and slave-owners in the southern states of the USA and the British and French West Indies took him at his word. Devoutly Christian and Muslim slave-traders pursued their profession for centuries; the extension of state welfare to the poor was opposed for a long time by Christians, and still is even in the Christian heartlands of the United States; female emancipation is vigorously opposed by a large number of Islamic teachers, and a large part of the Christian fellowship maintains barriers against the ordination of women. Christian aid to developing and stricken countries is often far from an unmixed blessing, and often not a blessing at all. Much-needed help might be, in fact notoriously has been, accompanied by a list of prohibitory conditions forbidding the use of contraceptives and of abortion where curbing population growth not only offers a long-term benefit to those regions, but is probably a necessary condition for the survival of humanity at all.

The fact that the major faiths often do good work is analogous to the logical fact that every falsehood deductively implies a truth. But the converse is not true: one can have truth without falsehood. So why follow the injunctions of religion, which often gets it very wrong indeed on moral matters, when we can follow our own consciences and more often get it

³⁹ Bombing civilian targets is not, unfortunately, by any means a monopoly of religious fanatics, as any cursory examination of the records of the Second World War, and subsequent 'liberating' wars, will reveal. One of the most appalling offences ever committed against humanity was the dropping of atomic bombs on two unprepared Japanese cities in 1945.

⁴⁰ Ephesians 6:5–8; Colossians 3:22–5; 1 Peter 2:18.

right? We certainly can do good, and want to do good, without having to be directed to do so by a presumptive God whose moral directives are frequently unpleasant and *immoral*. The great Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant pointed out that *no* action taken in deference to the wishes, or perceived wishes, of any external authority (and he included God in this category) ought to be regarded as truly moral. And he is surely right: no deed performed under duress, or to please a powerful individual, deserves to be judged as virtuous.

II. THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE HOLY

Many people nevertheless still think that work done in the name of religion is morally superior to that done for any other reason. That this continues to be believed when included in the numbers of those acting in the name of God were people who prescribed torture and execution for the slightest doctrinal deviance shows a dangerous naivety: still dangerous because it promotes a belief that civic oversight of ecclesiastical activities can be relaxed. A chilling counterexample is the recent evidence of widespread, long-term sexual abuse of children in Catholic orphanages and schools under the control of Catholic clergy, in the United States, Spain, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Brazil, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Mexico. At the time of writing, the Catholic Church has already paid out 2.5 billion dollars in compensation since 1950, but for long there were systematic attempts to conceal the evidence, sometimes with the police deliberately not being informed and sometimes where the victims were even paid for their silence. The leader of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, Cardinal Sean O’Brady, admitted being present when two teenage boys were persuaded by Church authorities to sign oaths of silence after testifying against Father Brendan Smyth, later convicted of a multitude of sexual offences’ assaults on children over the course of twenty years.

More evidence is coming forward that what happened in Ireland also happened in other Catholic jurisdictions. Investigators, working with the support of the Belgian Catholic Church, received 475 complaints of child abuse committed in the 1950s through to the late 1980s by Catholic clergy. ‘We can say that no congregation escapes sexual abuse of minors by one or several of its members’, the commission concluded.⁴¹ *No congregation, in the whole of Belgium*. Meanwhile, hotlines established in Germany and

⁴¹ *Daily Telegraph*, 10 September 2010.

Austria to deal with people claiming to be victims were inundated with calls: in Austria the system crashed on its first day, unable to cope with the more than 4,000 calls it received. Holger Eich, a psychologist with an Austrian support group, remarked: 'We are learning daily about the methods of education in Catholic institutions in Austria during the 1960s and 1970s. They can be summed up in one word: sadism.'

The terrible damage to very large numbers of vulnerable young people seems, however, to have been of less concern to the upper reaches of the current Catholic hierarchy than the ensuing damage to the Church itself. The current Pope, when as Cardinal Ratzinger he was in charge of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,⁴² asserted the Church's sole judicial authority during the ten years after the eighteenth birthday in cases involving accusations of rape and torture of erstwhile juveniles in its care.⁴³ All preliminary investigations were to be conveyed to Ratzinger's office and be subject to the so-called Pontifical Secret, breaches of which carried a variety of penalties up to and including excommunication. Benedict, to call him now by his Papal moniker, is fond of blaming the ills of society on secularism. But it is the secular authority that was prevented, by his Church and apparently on his orders, from acting to protect these victims.

There are models of how large organisations behave when threatened, in which they retaliate with whatever weapon comes most easily to hand, usually at first the law. The Roman Catholic Church, a very large multinational organisation, is no exception. It has responded to the well-founded accusations of child rape, torture and evasion of justice by denying liability and even declaring diplomatic immunity (the Vatican has stated that the Pope as head of a sovereign state cannot be convicted of offences against the civil law in the US, where a charge of obstructing justice has been laid). It has even claimed that the Church itself is a victim of hostile forces, which include the national presses of many countries, on one occasion comparing the unfavourable comments with anti-semitism.⁴⁴ One might think that after that at least non-Catholic countries would for the time being keep their distance from the Holy See. Not so. Such is the power of the brand, as the advertisers say, that in 2010 British taxpayers paid millions of pounds sterling for a state visit by the Pope.

⁴² The same body that oversaw the Inquisition.

⁴³ The British *Guardian* newspaper has a copy of the letter, written in 2001.

⁴⁴ The preacher to the papal household was reported as saying that the criticism of the Church reminded him of 'the more shameful acts of anti-semitism'.

12. DO AS YOU'RE TOLD

It is no understatement that mankind faces very grave threats to its survival: from overpopulation, over-exploitation of natural resources, destruction of supportive ecosystems and potentially catastrophic climate-change. The threats are magnified by the fact that a very substantial proportion of the world's population is in thrall to belief-systems that cause it to enhance these dangers. The major components of each of the three Abrahamic religions regard procreation as a command of God and any artificial inhibition of it as wicked; they regard the earth and its other species as merely a source of sustenance for human beings; and any indication that mankind is in peril through its own activities or otherwise is usually either condemned as a mischievous falsehood, or viewed as retribution for sin, or alternatively as a preparation for a Divinely planned end of the world: in any of these cases it is not something that mankind should or could attempt to prepare itself against. A certain amount of the widespread resistance to acknowledging the threat from climate-change, and even climate-change itself, comes from vested economic interests, but a good deal is certainly religiously inspired, particularly in the United States. In 2009, in a congressional hearing on proposed legislation to limit carbon emissions, John Shimkus, a Republican evangelical Christian, quoted God's postdiluvian promise in Genesis 8:26:

Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though all inclinations of his heart are evil from childhood and never again will I destroy all living creatures as I have done.

Mr Shimkus added: 'I believe that's the infallible word of God, and that's the way it's going to be for his creation.'

The churches' views of what are serious threats are summed up in one word: *sin*. Sin takes centre-stage. In all its multifarious forms, sin threatens God's disapproval not only of the sinner but of any complicity in the sin – which in practice means a tolerance of lifestyles in conflict with the injunctions of the churches and mosques. The current Pope observed in December 2009 that saving humanity from homosexual or transsexual acts was as important as saving the rainforests. Visiting Portugal a week before the Portuguese Parliament was due to legalise gay marriage, he further observed that legitimising gay marriage poses one of the most insidious threats to the fabric of society. Coming on the heels of the revelations of systematic child abuse within his church, this was a bit rich. But such is the religious perspective. His Holiness's observation was made on a visit to the

shrine of Fátima in Portugal, where in 1917 three shepherd children saw the Virgin Mary. Shortly after that, many thousands of people who had been commanded to look at the sun from that spot saw it changing colour and dancing in the sky. This is apparently a common effect of prolonged staring at the sun. 'We delude ourselves if we think that the prophetic mission of Fátima has come to an end', Benedict added. There are other delusions.

The Pope's view of a morally healthy society is, it need hardly be said, a society obedient to God. Dominating all the specific sins to which errant humanity is prone is that of *disobedience*. God's favourite archangel, Lucifer, was disobedient and was hurled out of heaven for it. Adam and Eve were disobedient and were cast out of Eden. 'For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous', the apostle Paul helpfully informed the Romans.⁴⁵ In this view, being moral *means* being obedient to God's commands and wishes, as the gospel of John makes explicit: 'sin is the transgression of the law'.⁴⁶ Centrally directed economies are called *command economies*. The Abrahamic religions are *command religions*.

But what is wrong with being obedient to God? one might ask. Surely the fact that God created us and indeed literally everything (including himself in a way that theologians believe to be both the greatest mystery and the greatest wonder) confers on him an automatic right to command, and a corresponding obligation on us to submit.⁴⁷ Someone who gave that claim more than a second thought, and presented the conclusive argument for dissenting that still reverberates through the philosophical world,⁴⁸ was the great eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume. The argument appears in a short passage of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, one of the great classics of western philosophy, a passage so deservedly much-quoted that I shall quote it again:

⁴⁵ Romans 5:19.

⁴⁶ John 3:4. There is a centuries-long debate inspired by a question Socrates posed in Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*: 'Is something good because God commands it or does God command it because it is good?' It impales the theist on the horns of an unpleasant dilemma: if the former disjunct is correct then God could in principle decide that murder was good and we would be morally obliged to act accordingly. William of Ockham reluctantly took this view, but only because he recognised that the alternative undermines theism completely: if God commands something because it is good then there is a standard of goodness independent of God, who then faces dismissal from one of the two central roles in which scripture cast him: creator of the universe and arbiter of good and evil. Aquinas tried to avoid the dilemma by asserting that God only enjoined us to do what is good *for us* given our natures, but this is just a disguised way of opting for the first horn since God himself endowed us with those natures.

⁴⁷ 'Islam' means 'submission'. ⁴⁸ And largely unknown outside, it need hardly be added.

I cannot forbear adding to these reasonings an observation which may perhaps be found to be of some importance. In every system of morality which I have hitherto met with I have always remarked that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations of human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, is and is not, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an ought, or an ought not. The change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this ought or ought not expresses some new relation or affirmation, it is necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others that are entirely different from it.

Hume might seem to be simply making a logical point,⁴⁹ but as so often with him – and as he intended – there is a profound implication to be drawn from it, of which many theologians still seem to remain, by and large, unaware. Just because God did what he did, exhibiting his infinite power and knowledge, etc. etc. (you can pile on as much infinity as you like here), it simply does not follow that we are *morally obliged* to do what he wants. If you want that to follow you will have to add as a new premise that we ought to obey God's will because he created us and the universe (such a 'new relation or affirmation . . . should be observed and explained'). But that, of course, is begging the question. It is no defence to say that God gave us a free will to *freely choose* whether to follow the moral norms he laid down for us.⁵⁰ The relevant fact is that he did not give us the freedom to *dissent* from his own view of their obligatory nature. On the contrary: he made it very clear that if we violate them we are liable to more or less severe punishment. Embellishing the account with declarations of his love for us, or with the promise of rewards for compliance, does nothing to change the fact that this is a morality imposed on a captive people.

But what, you may ask, about God's *love*, manifest (if you are a Christian) in his son Jesus Christ, who died to save us all? Though an originally jealous and punishing God managed – at any rate in the Christian Church – to modulate himself into a tender and loving one, the former was never extirpated, often imparting a discordantly sinister tone to the exhortations of the latter. Even though Christ was the incarnation of the phase-two,

⁴⁹ There have been many attempts to prove him wrong; the task is almost a rite of passage for philosophers. I examine them in my book *Hume's Problem: Induction and the Justification of Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵⁰ 2 Corinthians 9:7 is usually produced to emphasise that God doesn't want us to feel *compelled*.

tender and loving God, some of his warnings of divine retribution are strongly reminiscent of the sterner phase-one individual (this composite character seems less a Holy Trinity than a good cop–bad cop act). And even though Christ is supposed by his death to have atoned for our sins, we have it on the authority of the apostle Paul that we all still suffer from the Original Sin which persists like a lingering disease that can never be quite shaken off, and which together with Death is our collective punishment for the disobedience that dispatched Adam and Eve out of Paradise.

13. NONE SO BLIND . . .

It is a tribute – if that is the right word – to the extent to which people can willingly blind themselves to what they know instinctively is wrong, that the Biblical story of God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac is still widely seen as conveying a deep moral lesson. When the Lord, through his Angel, stays Abraham’s hand at the last second from cutting Isaac’s throat it is with the acknowledgment that ‘now I know that thou fearest God, seeing that thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me’ (Genesis 22:12). The Lord of Hosts benignly concludes his message by granting Abraham the favour that ‘in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice’ (22:18). The Old Testament contains quite a bit of this sort of thing. The story of God’s faithful servant Job is very similar in tone. God is a *person* according to Richard Swinburne,⁵¹ and according to a theory of ethics that originated with Aristotle and is still highly influential, the moral character of a person’s act is dependent on the motive behind it (the theory is called *virtue-ethics*). In that case the Abraham story casts strong doubt on God’s own morality, and it says a great deal about human credulity that generations of people have read that passage in the Bible without drawing the reasonable conclusion that the God of Abraham is a psychopath. It is curious, to say the least, that people can worship a deity whose standards of behaviour they would rightly condemn in any other person. Obeying the word of God is all-important, no matter how harsh and inhumane the order it conveys is. We saw the same deference to authority in the churches’ opposition to legalising physician-assisted suicide. *This* is the Judaeo-Christian moral heritage for which, we are frequently told, we should be eternally grateful.

⁵¹ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, rev. edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 7.

It should, I believe, by now be reasonably apparent that we should definitely *not* accept the widespread view that undermining the authority of religion will result in a collapse of public morals. On the contrary: most of us have a moral standard according to which punishing people for events over which they had no control (Original Sin) is wicked. Most of us feel an impulse to do good according to this standard, some admittedly more than others (the Latin poet Ovid said that he saw and approved the better and followed the worse⁵²). Secular charities still manage to thrive: generosity and kindness are far from being a monopoly of the religious. But what is needed is a confident assertion of a wholly secular but clearly compelling ethics to refute the propaganda of the churches that no such thing is possible, or if possible in theory, carries no force. Though exploded by Hume (and also Kant) in the eighteenth century, that claim is still repeated like a mantra, and not only by the churches, but also by those still too inured to think of good behaviour as the response to a divine command that they simply cannot imagine a more mature foundation for morality.

14. BACK TO THE FUTURE

Perhaps surprisingly, such a foundation was provided over two millennia ago. The place was Hellenistic Greece, in the fourth century BCE, most notably – in terms of what has survived – in the *Ethics* of Aristotle. The Greece of Aristotle was a very mixed society, or societies, engaging in a great deal of primitive god-worship. But at the same time, for reasons that have never been fully explained and probably never will, those societies were the origin of arguably all that is best in our contemporary world but is every day in danger of being lost: a spirit of free enquiry and a thirst for knowledge, coupled with the keen cultivation of a critical and analytical temperament. These found their expression not only in Greek science and mathematics, but also in its literature and drama. Nothing approaching that level of intellectual sophistication was seen until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and even then only fitfully. What happened between the fall of Hellenistic Greece and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in Europe, was of course the domination of quotidian life by religion, backed by military force and the apparatus of state.

Though one of the most important sources of Catholic theology, the *Summa Theologiae* of St Thomas Aquinas, incorporates Aristotle's famous notion of a *final cause* (the final cause of a thing is, roughly, the end

⁵² 'Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor'. *Metamorphoses*.

for which its nature has fitted it), there is a conceptual chasm between Aristotle's notion of *mankind's* final cause and Aquinas's. According to Aristotle, mankind is by nature a social species endowed with reason, whose end is to employ that reason to achieve a sort of contemplative fulfilment (*eudaimonia*) within an orderly civic society.⁵³ Aquinas retains Aristotle's idea of *natures* determining appropriate ends, but he takes the natures to be ordained by God, the theological analogue of Aristotle's Prime Mover,⁵⁴ and erects the usual authoritarian morality on them. According to Aquinas, acting contrary to those natures is acting in defiance of God's will, with the familiar litany of divine punishments meted out for such sins as adultery, masturbation, homosexuality, suicide and a failure to worship God. It is shocking to reflect that Aquinas lived over a thousand years after Aristotle. Though he admired Aristotle to the point of referring to him as 'the Philosopher' and appropriating much of his work, Aquinas marshalled it to an end of which Aristotle would certainly have disapproved.

Even if later traduced by Catholic theology, Aristotle's *Ethics*⁵⁵ signifies a momentous event in the history of thought. In it, for the first time as far as anyone knows, virtue was regarded not as doing moral work-outs to propitiate a divine tyrant, but the means to achieving an ideal of purely human virtue. It is true that references to the gods are liberally scattered throughout Aristotle's writings, but this was a conventional conceit and in any case these gods' characters and activities were nearer to those of a TV soap than to the lonely monomania of The One True God. It is also true that the word '*eudaimonia*' signifies a god-like state, but Aristotle used the term metaphorically to mean merely living well: his theory of virtue, and the reasons he believed that virtue should be pursued, owe absolutely nothing to theology. According to the classical scholar Jonathan Barnes, Aristotle's worship of the divine seems to have been no more than a reverence for the world and the order and beauty immanent in it,⁵⁶ and to that extent very much like that of Einstein 2,000 years later who was also prone to frequent mentions of God but disclaimed any belief in religion as it is normally understood.

⁵³ Virtuous action for Aristotle consists in using reason to ensure a sustainable, which meant *moderate*, way of satisfying one's natural appetites. Aristotle is very modern in feeling and in his appeal to reason to determine optimal ways of satisfying those desires has a claim to be called the father of modern decision theory (in which the rational agent calculates optimal decisions by weighing the desirability of the various possible outcomes of each contemplated act against their probabilities).

⁵⁴ Aristotle's Prime Mover is entirely unconcerned with anything human, or indeed with anything except the nature of its own thought.

⁵⁵ In fact Aristotle wrote two books of Ethics, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*, but the *Nicomachean Ethics* is usually considered the more fundamental.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Barnes, *Aristotle* (London: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 64–5.

The third President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, had a very Aristotelian attitude to the pursuit of virtue. In a letter Jefferson wrote to his nephew, he encouraged him not to fear an enquiry into the foundation of his religious belief since

[i]f it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in this exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you.⁵⁷

Quite so. Jefferson was the author of the American Declaration of Independence, that ringing endorsement of an ‘inalienable’ human right ‘to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’. Whether the right to the pursuit of happiness was a conscious echo of Aristotle I do not know, but it is highly probable: Jefferson was an enthusiastic classical scholar with a keen interest in political and moral philosophy, both classical and contemporary (he took his account of inalienable rights in general from Locke), and would certainly have been aware that Aristotle had laid it down as a fundamental principle in the *Ethics* that the end, or *telos*, of man is happiness, and that of the state is to promote it.⁵⁸

Aristotle’s concept of *eudaimonia* is, I believe, of the greatest importance in moral/social philosophy, and crucial to forging a stable and rewarding social and political climate in which human beings can achieve such potential as they have for happiness. It speaks to the best in human nature rather than the worst, to which speaks the religious concept-cluster of sin, punishment, atonement, expiation, repentance, forgiveness and a salvation not of this world (the Anglican hymn tries, unsuccessfully, to put an optimistic gloss on this basic crime-and-punishment package:

New perils past, new sins forgiven
New thoughts of God, new hopes of Heaven).

In the eighteenth century that other great philosopher, David Hume, adopted this key element of Aristotle’s moral theory and mixed it with seminal ideas of his own. In [Chapter 6](#) I will argue that the result provides a basis for a secular morality in which human beings become, in Kant’s arresting phrase, ‘self-legislating members of the kingdom of ends’, taking

⁵⁷ Quoted in Christopher Hitchens, *Thomas Jefferson: Author of America* (New York: Atlas Books/Harper Collins, 2005). Jefferson founded the University of Virginia, the first American institute of higher learning in which education was totally separated from religion (the university had no chapel or church).

⁵⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Christopher Rowe (trans.) (Oxford University Press, 2002), Book VII.

ultimate authority for their own standards of right and wrong and of good and bad.

15. 'SAY NOT, THE STRUGGLE NAUGHT AVAILETH . . .'

Repatriating our moral constitution, like most attempts to gain independence, is easier said than done, however. The struggle is not so much against the Great Governor himself, who has seldom personally intervened, especially recently, but against the large number of those who claim and believe themselves to be his followers on earth. Sometimes, as we know, they can respond with the utmost savagery, but these days usually more insidiously through the institutions of education and the enactment of protective laws and regulations like UN Resolution 62/154. The main battle is intellectual: people in their billions are still not prepared to admit that they can or should be independent of the will of God. The best way to remove that obstacle is to show them that the person to whom they believe themselves subject is in all probability nothing but a figment of their own imaginations. Although, like George Orwell's Big Brother, he is never seen, believers nevertheless think that he has given more than enough evidence of his existence to remove any reasonable doubt on that score. In the remainder of this book I will explain why that opinion is very far from the truth.

EXERCISE

'Evil acts committed in the name of religion in no way impugn the truth of the faith; they instead impugn the nature of human beings, those rusty containers into which the pure water of that truth has been placed.' Comment.

MAIN POINTS OF CHAPTER 1

- The Abrahamic religions are totalitarian belief-systems. They have been responsible for large-scale persecution and oppression, and still constitute a serious threat to individual freedom and autonomy.
- Even today the equality of the sexes and what should be reasonable freedoms, like that of sexual orientation, and in particular the freedom to arrange a dignified and peaceful end to one's life, are still opposed by some or all these religions.
- According to all these religions we are created and owned by God, and thereby obliged to obey his commands.

- Apologists use a pick'n'mix policy with the scriptures to avoid both internal inconsistency and also conflict with our intuitions. This policy leaves it open, and in any case reveals that one is using one's own moral faculty to discriminate between the acceptable and the unacceptable parts of scripture. But that implies that one's own moral intuition is primary, in which case still insisting on finding scriptural backing is a form of moral cowardice.
- By elevating obedience and a-rational faith into cardinal virtues these command-religions discourage critical thought and threaten thereby the single most important safeguard of civil liberty. The argument is an old one, going back to John Stuart Mill and before, but such is the continuing power of religious propaganda that it is in constant need of restating.
- A more enlightened, secular ethics based on the principle of *eudaimonia* was proposed two millennia ago by Aristotle – and almost forgotten. A religiously based ethics was subsequently imposed, and has been dominant since. It is time to return to an Aristotelian view.