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# god is not great

by Christopher Hitchens

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Oh, wearisome condition of humanity,  
Born under one law, to another bound;  
Vainly begot, and yet forbidden vanity,  
Created sick, commanded to be sound.  
—FULKE GREVILLE, *Mustapha*

And do you think that unto such as you  
A maggot-minded, starved, fanatic crew  
God gave a secret, and denied it me?  
Well, well—what matters it? Believe that, too!  
—*THE RUBAIYAT OF OMAR KHAYYAM*  
(RICHARD LE GALLIENNE TRANSLATION)

Peacefully they will die, peacefully they will expire in your name, and  
beyond the grave they will find only death. But we will keep the secret,  
and for their own happiness we will entice them with a heavenly and eternal reward.  
—THE GRAND INQUISITOR TO HIS "SAVIOR" in *THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV*

## Chapter One

### Putting It Mildly

If the intended reader of this book should want to go beyond disagreement with its author and try to identify the sins and deformities that animated him to write it (and I have certainly noticed that those who publicly affirm charity and compassion and forgiveness are often inclined to take this course), then he or she will not just be quarreling with the unknowable and ineffable creator who—presumably—opted to make me this way. They will be defiling the memory of a good, sincere, simple woman, of stable and decent faith, named Mrs. Jean Watts.

It was Mrs. Watts's task, when I was a boy of about nine and attending a school on the edge of Dartmoor, in southwestern England, to instruct me in lessons about nature, and also about scripture. She would take me and my fellows on walks, in an especially lovely part of my beautiful country of birth, and teach us to tell the different birds, trees, and plants from one another. The amazing variety to be found in a hedgerow; the wonder of a clutch of eggs found in an intricate nest; the way that if the nettles stung your legs (we had to wear shorts) there would be a soothing dock leaf planted near to hand: all this has stayed in my mind, just like the "gamekeeper's museum," where the local peasantry would display the corpses of rats, weasels, and other vermin and predators, presumably supplied by some less kindly deity. If you read John Clare's imperishable rural poems you will catch the music of what I mean to convey.

At later lessons we would be given a printed slip of paper entitled "Search the Scriptures," which was sent to the school by whatever national authority supervised the teaching of religion. (This, along with daily prayer services, was compulsory and enforced by the state.) The slip would contain a single verse from the Old or New Testament, and the assignment was to look up the verse and then to tell the class or the teacher, orally or in writing, what the story and the moral was. I used to love this exercise, and even to excel at it so that (like Bertie Wooster) I frequently passed "top" in scripture class. It was my first introduction to practical and textual criticism. I would read all the chapters that led up to the verse, and all the ones that followed it, to be sure that I had got the "point" of the original clue. I can still do this, greatly to the annoyance of some of my enemies, and still have respect for those whose style is sometimes dismissed as "merely" Talmudic, or Koranic, or "fundamentalist." This is good and necessary mental and literary training.

However, there came a day when poor, dear Mrs. Watts overreached herself. Seeking ambitiously to fuse her two roles as nature instructor and Bible teacher, she said, "So you see, children, how powerful and generous God is. He has made all the trees and grass to be green, which is exactly the color that is most restful to our eyes. Imagine if

instead, the vegetation was all purple, or orange, how awful that would be."

And now behold what this pious old trout hath wrought. I liked Mrs. Watts: she was an affectionate and childless widow who had a friendly old sheepdog who really was named Rover, and she would invite us for sweets and treats after hours to her slightly ramshackle old house near the railway line. If Satan chose her to tempt me into error he was much more inventive than the subtle serpent in the Garden of Eden. She never raised her voice or offered violence—which couldn't be said for all my teachers—and in general was one of those people, of the sort whose memorial is in *Middlemarch*, of whom it may be said that if "things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been," this is "half-owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

However, I was frankly appalled by what she said. My little ankle strap sandals curled with embarrassment for her. At the age of nine I had not even a conception of the argument from design, or of Darwinian evolution as its rival, or of the relationship between photosynthesis and chlorophyll. The secrets of the genome were as hidden from me as they were, at that time, to everyone else. I had not then visited scenes of nature where almost everything was hideously indifferent or hostile to human life, if not life itself. I simply knew, almost as if I had privileged access to a higher authority, that my teacher had managed to get everything wrong in just two sentences. The eyes were adjusted to nature, and not the other way about.

I must not pretend to remember everything perfectly, or in order, after this epiphany, but in a fairly short time I had also begun to notice other oddities. Why, if god was the creator of all things, were we supposed to "praise" him so incessantly for doing what came to him naturally? This seemed servile, apart from anything else. If Jesus could heal a blind person he happened to meet, then why not heal blindness? What was so wonderful about his casting out devils, so that the devils would enter a herd of pigs instead? That seemed sinister: more like black magic. With all this continual prayer, why no result? Why did I have to keep saying, in public, that I was a miserable sinner? Why was the subject of sex considered so toxic? These faltering and childish objections are, I have since discovered, extremely commonplace, partly because no religion can meet them with any satisfactory answer. But another, larger one also presented itself. (I say "presented itself" rather than "occurred to me" because these objections are, as well as insuperable, inescapable.) The headmaster, who led the daily services and prayers and held the Book, and was a bit of a sadist and a closeted homosexual (and whom I have long since forgiven because he ignited my interest in history and lent me my first copy of P. G. Wodehouse), was giving a no-nonsense talk to some of us one evening. "You may not see the point of all this faith now," he said. "But you will one day, when you start to lose loved ones." Again, I experienced a stab of sheer indignation as well as

disbelief. Why, that would be as much as saying that religion might not be true, but never mind that, since it can be relied upon for comfort. How contemptible. I was then nearing thirteen, and becoming quite the insufferable little intellectual. I had never heard of Sigmund Freud—though he would have been very useful to me in understanding the headmaster—but I had just been given a glimpse of his essay *The Future of an Illusion*.

I am inflicting all this upon you because I am not one of those whose chance at a wholesome belief was destroyed by child abuse or brutish indoctrination. I know that millions of human beings have had to endure these things, and I do not think that religions can or should be absolved from imposing such miseries. (In the very recent past, we have seen the Church of Rome befouled by its complicity with the unpardonable sin of child rape, or, as it might be phrased in Latin form, "no child's behind left.") But other nonreligious organizations have committed similar crimes, or even worse ones.

There still remain four irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking.

I do not think it is arrogant of me to claim that I had already discovered these four objections (as well as noticed the more vulgar and obvious fact that religion is used by those in temporal charge to invest themselves with authority) before my boyish voice had broken. I am morally certain that millions of other people came to very similar conclusions in very much the same way, and I have since met such people in hundreds of places, and in dozens of different countries. Many of them never believed, and many of them abandoned faith after a difficult struggle. Some of them had blinding moments of unconvinced that were every bit as instantaneous, though perhaps less epileptic and apocalyptic (and later more rationally and more morally justified) than Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road. And here is the point, about myself and my co-thinkers. Our belief is not a belief. Our principles are not a faith. We do not rely solely upon science and reason, because these are necessary rather than sufficient factors, but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason. We may differ on many things, but what we respect is free inquiry, open mindedness, and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake. We do not hold our convictions dogmatically: the disagreement between Professor Stephen Jay Gould and Professor Richard Dawkins, concerning "punctuated evolution" and the unfilled gaps in post-Darwinian theory, is quite wide as well as quite deep, but we shall resolve it by evidence and reasoning and not by mutual excommunication. (My own annoyance at Professor Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, for their cringe-making proposal that atheists should conceitedly nominate themselves to be called "brights," is a

part of a continuous argument.) We are not immune to the lure of wonder and mystery and awe: we have music and art and literature, and find that the serious ethical dilemmas are better handled by Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Schiller and Dostoyevsky and George Eliot than in the mythical morality tales of the holy books. Literature, not scripture, sustains the mind and—since there is no other metaphor—also the soul. We do not believe in heaven or hell, yet no statistic will ever find that without these blandishments and threats we commit more crimes of greed or violence than the faithful. (In fact, if a proper statistical inquiry could ever be made, I am sure the evidence would be the other way.) We are reconciled to living only once, except through our children, for whom we are perfectly happy to notice that we must make way, and room. We speculate that it is at least possible that, once people accepted the fact of their short and struggling lives, they might behave better toward each other and not worse. We believe with certainty that an ethical life can be lived without religion. And we know for a fact that the corollary holds true—that religion has caused innumerable people not just to conduct themselves no better than others, but to award themselves permission to behave in ways that would make a brothel-keeper or an ethnic cleanser raise an eyebrow. Most important of all, perhaps, we infidels do not need any machinery of reinforcement. We are those who Blaise Pascal took into account when he wrote to the one who says, "I am so made that I cannot believe." In the village of Montailou, during one of the great medieval persecutions, a woman was asked by the Inquisitors to tell them from whom she had acquired her heretical doubts about hell and resurrection. She must have known that she stood in terrible danger of a lingering death administered by the pious, but she responded that she took them from nobody and had evolved them all by herself. (Often, you hear the believers praise the simplicity of their flock, but not in the case of this unforced and conscientious sanity and lucidity, which has been stamped out and burned out in the cases of more humans than we shall ever be able to name.)

There is no need for us to gather every day, or every seven days, or on any high and auspicious day, to proclaim our rectitude or to grovel and wallow in our unworthiness. We atheists do not require any priests, or any hierarchy above them, to police our doctrine. Sacrifices and ceremonies are abhorrent to us, as are relics and the worship of any images or objects (even including objects in the form of one of man's most useful innovations: the bound book). To us no spot on earth is or could be "holier" than another: to the ostentatious absurdity of the pilgrimage, or the plain horror of killing civilians in the name of some sacred wall or cave or shrine or rock, we can counter-pose a leisurely or urgent walk from one side of the library or the gallery to another, or to lunch with an agreeable friend, in pursuit of truth or beauty. Some of these excursions to the bookshelf or the lunch or the gallery will obviously, if they are serious, bring us into contact with belief and believers, from the great devotional painters and composers to the works of Augustine, Aquinas, Maimonides, and Newman. These mighty scholars may have written many evil things or

many foolish things, and been laughably ignorant of the germ theory of disease or the place of the terrestrial globe in the solar system, let alone the universe, and this is the plain reason why there are no more of them today, and why there will be no more of them tomorrow. Religion spoke its last intelligible or noble or inspiring words a long time ago: either that or it mutated into an admirable but nebulous humanism, as did, say, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a brave Lutheran pastor hanged by the Nazis for his refusal to collude with them. We shall have no more prophets or sages from the ancient quarter, which is why the devotions of today are only the echoing repetitions of yesterday, sometimes ratcheted up to screaming point so as to ward off the terrible emptiness.

While some religious apology is magnificent in its limited way—one might cite Pascal—and some of it is dreary and absurd—here one cannot avoid naming C. S. Lewis—both styles have something in common, namely the appalling load of strain that they have to bear. How much effort it takes to affirm the incredible! The Aztecs had to tear open a human chest cavity *every day* just to make sure that the sun would rise. Monotheists are supposed to pester their deity more times than that, perhaps, lest he be deaf. How much vanity must be concealed—not too effectively at that—in order to pretend that one is the personal object of a divine plan? How much self-respect must be sacrificed in order that one may squirm continually in an awareness of one's own sin? How many needless assumptions must be made, and how much contortion is required, to receive every new insight of science and manipulate it so as to "fit" with the revealed words of ancient man-made deities? How many saints and miracles and councils and conclaves are required in order first to be able to establish a dogma and then—after infinite pain and loss and absurdity and cruelty—to be forced to rescind one of those dogmas? God did not create man in his own image. Evidently, it was the other way about, which is the painless explanation for the profusion of gods and religions, and the fratricide both between and among faiths, that we see all about us and that has so retarded the development of civilization. Past and present religious atrocities have occurred not because we are evil, but because it is a fact of nature that the human species is, biologically, only partly rational. Evolution has meant that our prefrontal lobes are too small, our adrenal glands are too big, and our reproductive organs apparently designed by committee; a recipe which, alone or in combination, is very certain to lead to some unhappiness and disorder. But still, what a difference when one lays aside the strenuous believers and takes up the no less arduous work of a Darwin, say, or a Hawking or a Crick. These men are more enlightening when they are wrong, or when they display their inevitable biases, than any falsely modest person of faith who is vainly trying to square the circle and to explain how he, a mere creature of the Creator, can possibly know what that Creator intends. Not all can be agreed on matters of aesthetics, but we secular humanists and atheists and agnostics do not wish to deprive humanity of its wonders or consolations. Not in the least. If you will devote a little time to studying the staggering photographs

taken by the Hubble telescope, you will be scrutinizing things that are far more awesome and mysterious and beautiful—and more chaotic and overwhelming and forbidding—than any creation or "end of days" story. If you read Hawking on the "event horizon," that theoretical lip of the "black hole" over which one could in theory plunge and see the past and the future (except that one would, regrettably and by definition, not have enough "time"), I shall be surprised if you can still go on gaping at Moses and his unimpressive "burning bush." If you examine the beauty and symmetry of the double helix, and then go on to have your own genome sequence fully analyzed, you will be at once impressed that such a near-perfect phenomenon is at the core of your being, and reassured (I hope) that you have so much in common with other tribes of the human species—"race" having gone, along with "creation" into the ashcan—and further fascinated to learn how much you are a part of the animal kingdom as well. Now at last you can be properly humble in the face of your maker, which turns out not to be a "who," but a process of mutation with rather more random elements than our vanity might wish. This is more than enough mystery and marvel for any mammal to be getting along with: the most educated person in the world now has to admit—I shall *not* say confess—that he or she knows less and less but at least knows less and less about more and more.

As for consolation, since religious people so often insist that faith answers this supposed need, I shall simply say that those who offer false consolation are false friends. In any case, the critics of religion do not simply deny that it has a painkilling effect. Instead, they warn against the placebo and the bottle of colored water. Probably the most popular misquotation of modern times—certainly the most popular in this argument—is the assertion that Marx dismissed religion as "the opium of the people." On the contrary, this son of a rabbinical line took belief very seriously and wrote, in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, as follows:

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition that needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of woe, the halo of which is religion. Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain, not so that man will wear the chain without any fantasy or consolation but so that he will shake off the chain and cull the living flower.

So the famous misquotation is not so much a "misquotation" but rather a very crude attempt to misrepresent the philosophical case against religion. Those

who have believed what the priests and rabbis and imams tell them about what the unbelievers think and about how they think, will find further such surprises as we go along. They will perhaps come to distrust what they are told—or not to take it "on faith," which is the problem to begin with.

Marx and Freud, it has to be conceded, were not doctors or exact scientists. It is better to think of them as great and fallible imaginative essayists. When the intellectual universe alters, in other words, I don't feel arrogant enough to exempt myself from self-criticism. And I am content to think that some contradictions will remain contradictory, some problems will never be resolved by the mammalian equipment of the human cerebral cortex, and some things are indefinitely unknowable. If the universe was found to be finite or infinite, either discovery would be equally stupefying and impenetrable to me. And though I have met many people much wiser and more clever than myself, I know of nobody who could be wise or intelligent enough to say differently.

Thus the mildest criticism of religion is also the most radical and the most devastating one. Religion is man-made. Even the men who made it cannot agree on what their prophets or redeemers or gurus actually said or did. Still less can they hope to tell us the "meaning" of later discoveries and developments which were, when they began, either obstructed by their religions or denounced by them. And yet—the believers still claim to know! Not just to know, but to know *everything*. Not just to know that god exists, and that he created and supervised the whole enterprise, but also to know what "he" demands of us—from our diet to our observances to our sexual morality. In other words, in a vast and complicated discussion where we know more and more about less and less, yet can still hope for some enlightenment as we proceed, one faction—itsself composed of mutually warring factions—has the sheer arrogance to tell us that we already have all the essential information we need. Such stupidity, combined with such pride, should be enough on its own to exclude "belief" from the debate. The person who is certain, and who claims divine warrant for his certainty, belongs now to the infancy of our species. It may be a long farewell, but it has begun and, like all farewells, should not be protracted.

I trust that if you met me, you would not necessarily know that this was my view. I have probably sat up later, and longer, with religious friends than with any other kind. These friends often irritate me by saying that I am a "seeker," which I am not, or not in the way they think. If I went back to Devon, where Mrs. Watts has her unvisited tomb, I would surely find myself sitting quietly at the back of some old Celtic or Saxon church. (Philip Larkin's lovely poem "Churchgoing" is the perfect capture of my own attitude.) I once wrote a book about George Orwell, who might have been my hero if I had heroes, and was upset by his callousness about the burning of churches in Catalonia in 1936. Sophocles showed, well before the rise of monotheism, that Antigone spoke for humanity in her revulsion against desecration. I leave it to the faithful to

burn each other's churches and mosques and synagogues, which they can always be relied upon to do. When I go to the mosque, I take off my shoes. When I go to the synagogue, I cover my head. I once even observed the etiquette of an ashram in India, though this was a trial to me. My parents did not try to impose any religion: I was probably fortunate in having a father who had not especially loved his strict Baptist/Calvinist upbringing, and a mother who preferred assimilation—partly for my sake—to the Judaism of her forebears. I now know enough about all religions to know that I would always be an infidel at all times and in all places, but my particular atheism is a Protestant atheism. It is with the splendid liturgy of the King James Bible and the Cranmer prayer book—liturgy that the fatuous Church of England has cheaply discarded—that I first disagreed. When my father died and was buried in a chapel overlooking Portsmouth—the same chapel in which General Eisenhower had prayed for success the night before D-Day in 1944—I gave the address from the pulpit and selected as my text a verse from the epistle of Saul of Tarsus, later to be claimed as "Saint Paul," to the Philippians (chapter 4, verse 8): Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report: if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

I chose this because of its haunting and elusive character, which will be with me at the last hour, and for its essentially secular injunction, and because it shone out from the wasteland of rant and complaint and nonsense and bullying which surrounds it. The argument with faith is the foundation and origin of all arguments, because it is the beginning—but not the end—of all arguments about philosophy, science, history, and human nature. It is also the beginning—but by no means the end—of all disputes about the good life and the just city. Religious faith is, precisely *because* we are still-evolving creatures, ineradicable. It will never die out, or at least not until we get over our fear of death, and of the dark, and of the unknown, and of each other. For this reason, I would not prohibit it even if I thought I could. Very generous of me, you may say. But will the religious grant me the same indulgence? I ask because there is a real and serious difference between me and my religious friends, and the real and serious friends are sufficiently honest to admit it. I would be quite content to go to their children's bar mitzvahs, to marvel at their Gothic cathedrals, to "respect" their belief that the Koran was dictated, though exclusively in Arabic, to an illiterate merchant, or to interest myself in Wicca and Hindu and Jain consolations. And as it happens, I will continue to do this without insisting on the polite reciprocal condition—which is *that they in turn leave me alone*. But this, religion is ultimately incapable of doing. As I write these words, and as you read them, people of faith are in their different ways planning your and my destruction, and the destruction of all the hard-won human attainments that I have touched upon. *Religion poisons everything.*

## Chapter Two

### Religion Kills

His aversion to religion, in the sense usually attached to the term, was of the same kind with that of Lucretius: he regarded it with the feelings due not to a mere mental delusion, but to a great moral evil. He looked upon it as the greatest enemy of morality: first, by setting up factitious excellencies—belief in creeds, devotional feelings, and ceremonies, not connected with the good of human kind—and causing these to be accepted as substitutes for genuine virtue: but above all, by radically vitiating the standard of morals; making it consist in doing the will of a being, on whom it lavishes indeed all the phrases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it depicts as eminently hateful.

—JOHN STUART MILL ON HIS FATHER, IN THE *AUTOBIOGRAPHY*

*Tantum religio potuit suaderemalorum.*

(To such heights of evil are men driven by religion.)

—LUCRETIUS, *DE RERUM NATURA*

Imagine that you can perform a feat of which I am incapable. Imagine, in other words, that you can picture an infinitely benign and all-powerful creator, who conceived of you, then made and shaped you, brought you into the world he had made for you, and now supervises and cares for you even while you sleep. Imagine, further, that if you obey the rules and commandments that he has lovingly prescribed, you will qualify for an eternity of bliss and repose. I do not say that I envy you this belief (because to me it seems like the wish for a horrible form of benevolent and unalterable dictatorship), but I do have a sincere question. Why does such a belief not make its adherents happy? It must seem to them that they have come into possession of a marvelous secret, of the sort that they could cling to in moments of even the most extreme adversity.

Superficially, it does sometimes seem as if this is the case. I have been to evangelical services, in black and in white communities, where the whole event was one long whoop of exaltation at being saved, loved, and so forth. Many services, in all denominations and among almost all pagans, are exactly designed to evoke celebration and communal fiesta, which is precisely why I suspect them. There are more restrained and sober and elegant moments, also. When I was a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, I could feel, even if I could not believe, the joyous words that are exchanged between believers on Easter morning: "*Christos anesti!*" (Christ is risen!) "*Alethos anesti!*" (He is risen indeed!) I was a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, I might add, for a reason that explains why very many people profess an outward allegiance. I joined it to please my Greek parents-in-law. The archbishop who received me into his communion on the same day that he officiated at my wedding, thereby trousering two fees instead of the usual one, later became an enthusiastic cheerleader and fund-raiser for his fellow Orthodox Serbian mass murderers Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, who filled countless mass graves all over Bosnia.

The next time I got married, which was by a Reform Jewish rabbi with an Einsteinian and Shakespearean bent, I had something a little more in common with the officiating person. But even he was aware that his lifelong homosexuality was, in principle, condemned as a capital offense, punishable by the founders of his religion by stoning. As to the Anglican Church into which I was originally baptized, it may look like a pathetic bleating sheep today, but as the descendant of a church that has always enjoyed a state subsidy and an intimate relationship with hereditary monarchy, it has a historic responsibility for the Crusades, for persecution of Catholics, Jews, and Dissenters, and for combat against science and reason. The level of intensity fluctuates according to time and place, but it can be stated as a truth that religion does not, and in the long run cannot, be content with its own marvelous claims and sublime assurances. It *must* seek to interfere with the lives of nonbelievers, or heretics, or adherents of other faiths. It may speak about the bliss of the next world, but it wants power in this one. This is only to be expected. It is, after all, wholly man-made. And it does not have the confidence in its own various preachings even to allow coexistence between different faiths.

Take a single example, from one of the most revered figures that modern religion has produced. In 1996, the Irish Republic held a referendum on one question: whether its state constitution should still prohibit divorce. Most of the political parties, in an increasingly secular country, urged voters to approve of a change in the law. They did so for two excellent reasons. It was no longer thought right that the Roman Catholic Church should legislate its morality for all citizens, and it was obviously impossible even to hope for eventual Irish reunification if the large Protestant minority in the North was continually repelled by the possibility of clerical rule. Mother Teresa flew all the way from Calcutta to help campaign, along with the church and its hard-liners, for a "no" vote. In other words, an Irish woman married to a wife-beating and incestuous drunk should never expect anything better, and might endanger her soul if she begged for a fresh start, while as for the Protestants, they could either choose the blessings of Rome or stay out altogether. There was not even the suggestion that Catholics could follow their own church's commandments while not imposing them on all other citizens. And this in the British Isles, in the last decade of the twentieth century. The referendum eventually amended the constitution, though by the narrowest of majorities. (Mother Teresa in the same year gave an interview saying that she hoped her friend Princess Diana would be happier after she had escaped from what was an obviously miserable marriage, but it's less of a surprise to find the church applying sterner laws to the poor, or offering indulgences to the rich.)

A week before the events of September 11, 2001, I was on a panel with Dennis Prager, who is one of America's better-known religious broadcasters. He challenged me in public to answer what he called a "straight yes/no question," and I happily agreed. Very well, he said. I was to imagine myself

in a strange city as the evening was coming on. Toward me I was to imagine that I saw a large group of men approaching. Now—would I feel safer, or less safe, if I was to learn that they were just coming from a prayer meeting? As the reader will see, this is not a question to which a yes/no answer can be given. But I was able to answer it as if it were not hypothetical. "Just to stay within the letter 'B,' I have actually had that experience in Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad. In each case I can say absolutely, and can give my reasons, why I would feel immediately threatened if I thought that the group of men approaching me in the dusk were coming from a religious observance."

Here, then, is a very brief summary of the religiously inspired cruelty I witnessed in these six places. In Belfast, I have seen whole streets burned out by sectarian warfare between different sects of Christianity, and interviewed people whose relatives and friends have been kidnapped and killed or tortured by rival religious death squads, often for no other reason than membership of another confession. There is an old Belfast joke about the man stopped at a roadblock and asked his religion. When he replies that he is an atheist he is asked, "Protestant or Catholic atheist?" I think this shows how the obsession has rotted even the legendary local sense of humor. In any case, this did actually happen to a friend of mine and the experience was decidedly not an amusing one. The ostensible pretext for this mayhem is rival nationalisms, but the street language used by opposing rival tribes consists of terms insulting to the other confession ("Prods" and "Teagues"). For many years, the Protestant establishment wanted Catholics to be both segregated and suppressed. Indeed, in the days when the Ulster state was founded, its slogan was: "A Protestant Parliament for a Protestant People." Sectarianism is conveniently self-generating and can always be counted upon to evoke a reciprocal sectarianism. On the main point, the Catholic leadership was in agreement. It desired clerical dominated schools and segregated neighborhoods, the better to exert its control. So, in the name of god, the old hatreds were drilled into new generations of schoolchildren, and are still being drilled. (Even the word "drill" makes me queasy: a power tool of that kind was often used to destroy the kneecaps of those who fell foul of the religious gangs.)

When I first saw Beirut, in the summer of 1975, it was still recognizable as "the Paris of the Orient." Yet this apparent Eden was infested with a wide selection of serpents. It suffered from a positive surplus of religions, all of them "accommodated" by a sectarian state constitution. The president by law had to be a Christian, usually a Maronite Catholic, the speaker of the parliament a Muslim, and so on. This never worked well, because it institutionalized differences of belief as well as of caste and ethnicity (the Shia Muslims were at the bottom of the social scale, the Kurds were disenfranchised altogether). The main Christian party was actually a Catholic militia called the Phalange, or "Phalanx," and had been founded by a Maronite Lebanese named Pierre Gemayel who had been very impressed by his visit to Hitler's Berlin Olympics in

1936. It was later to achieve international notoriety by conducting the massacre of Palestinians at the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps in 1982, while acting under the orders of General Sharon. That a Jewish general should collaborate with a fascist party may seem grotesque enough, but they had a common Muslim enemy and that was enough. Israel's irruption into Lebanon that year also gave an impetus to the birth of Hezbollah, the modestly named "Party of God," which mobilized the Shia underclass and gradually placed it under the leadership of the theocratic dictatorship in Iran that had come to power three years previously. It was in lovely Lebanon, too, having learned to share the kidnapping business with the ranks of organized crime, that the faithful moved on to introduce us to the beauties of suicide bombing. I can still see that severed head in the road outside the near-shattered French embassy. On the whole, I tended to cross the street when the prayer meetings broke up. Bombay also used to be considered a pearl of the Orient, with its necklace of lights along the cornice and its magnificent British Raj architecture. It was one of India's most diverse and plural cities, and its many layers of texture have been cleverly explored by Salman Rushdie—especially in *The Moor's Last Sigh*—and in the films of Mira Nair. It is true that there had been inter-communal fighting there, during the time in 1947-48 when the grand historic movement for Indian self-government was being ruined by Muslim demands for a separate state and by the fact that the Congress Party was led by a pious Hindu. But probably as many people took refuge in Bombay during that moment of religious bloodlust as were driven or fled from it.

A form of cultural coexistence resumed, as often happens when cities are exposed to the sea and to influences from outside. Parsis—former Zoroastrians who had been persecuted in Persia—were a prominent minority, and the city was also host to a historically significant community of Jews. But this was not enough to content Mr. Bal Thackeray and his Shiv Sena Hindu nationalist movement, who in the 1990s decided that Bombay should be run by and for his coreligionists, and who loosed a tide of goons and thugs onto the streets. Just to show he could do it, he ordered the city renamed as "Mumbai," which is partly why I include it in this list under its traditional title.

Belgrade had until the 1980s been the capital of Yugoslavia, or the land of the southern Slavs, which meant by definition that it was the capital of a multiethnic and multiconfessional state. But a secular Croatian intellectual once gave me a warning that, as in Belfast, took the form of a sour joke. "If I tell people that I am an atheist and a Croat," he said, "people ask me how I can prove I am not a Serb." To be Croatian, in other words, is to be Roman Catholic. To be a Serb is to be Christian Orthodox. In the 1940s, this meant a Nazi puppet state, set up in Croatia and enjoying the patronage of the Vatican, which naturally sought to exterminate all the Jews in the region but also undertook a campaign of forcible conversion directed at the other Christian community. Tens of thousands of Orthodox Christians were either slaughtered or deported in

consequence, and a vast concentration camp was set up near the town of Jasenovacs. So disgusting was the regime of General Ante Pavelic and his Ustashe party that even many German officers protested at having to be associated with it. By the time I visited the site of the Jasenovacs camp in 1992, the jackboot was somewhat on the other foot. The Croatian cities of Vukovar and Dubrovnik had been brutally shelled by the armed forces of Serbia, now under the control of Slobodan Milosevic. The mainly Muslim city of Sarajevo had been encircled and was being bombarded around the clock. Elsewhere in Bosnia-Herzegovina, especially along the river Drina, whole towns were pillaged and massacred in what the Serbs themselves termed "ethnic cleansing." In point of fact, "religious cleansing" would have been nearer the mark. Milosevic was an ex-Communist bureaucrat who had mutated into a xenophobic nationalist, and his anti-Muslim crusade, which was a cover for the annexation of Bosnia to a "Greater Serbia," was to a large extent carried out by unofficial militias operating under his "deniable" control. These gangs were made up of religious bigots, often blessed by Orthodox priests and bishops, and sometimes augmented by fellow Orthodox "volunteers" from Greece and Russia. They made a special attempt to destroy all evidence of Ottoman civilization, as in the specially atrocious case of the dynamiting of several historic minarets in Banja Luka, which was done during a cease-fire and not as the result of any battle.

The same was true, as is often forgotten, of their Catholic counterparts. The Ustashe formations were revived in Croatia and made a vicious attempt to take over Herzegovina, as they had during the Second World War. The beautiful city of Mostar was also shelled and besieged, and the world-famous Stari Most, or "Old Bridge," dating from Turkish times and listed by UNESCO as a cultural site of world importance, was bombarded until it fell into the river below. In effect, the extremist Catholic and Orthodox forces were colluding in a bloody partition and cleansing of Bosnia-Herzegovina. They were, and still are, largely spared the public shame of this, because the world's media preferred the simplification of "Croat" and "Serb," and only mentioned religion when discussing "the Muslims." But the triad of terms "Croat," "Serb," and "Muslim" is unequal and misleading, in that it equates two nationalities and one religion. (The same blunder is made in a different way in coverage of Iraq, with the "Sunni-Shia- Kurd" trilateral.) There were at least ten thousand Serbs in Sarajevo throughout the siege, and one of the leading commanders of its defense, an officer and gentleman named General Jovan Divjak, whose hand I was proud to shake under fire, was a Serb also. The city's Jewish population, which dated from 1492, also identified itself for the most part with the government and the cause of Bosnia. It would have been far more accurate if the press and television had reported that "today the Orthodox Christian forces resumed their bombardment of Sarajevo," or "yesterday the Catholic militia succeeded in collapsing the Stari Most." But confessional terminology was reserved only for "Muslims," even as their murderers went to all the

trouble of distinguishing themselves by wearing large Orthodox crosses over their bandoliers, or by taping portraits of the Virgin Mary to their rifle butts. Thus, once again, *religion poisons everything*, including our own faculties of discernment.

As for Bethlehem, I suppose I would be willing to concede to Mr. Prager that on a good day, I would feel safe enough standing around outside the Church of the Nativity as evening came on. It is in Bethlehem, not far from Jerusalem, that many believe that, with the cooperation of an immaculately conceived virgin, god was delivered of a son.

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was in this wise. When his mother, Mary, was espoused to Joseph, before they came together she was found with child of the Holy Ghost." Yes, and the Greek demigod Perseus was born when the god Jupiter visited the virgin Danae as a shower of gold and got her with child. The god Buddha was born through an opening in his mother's flank. Catlicus the serpent-skirted caught a little ball of feathers from the sky and hid it in her bosom, and the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli was thus conceived. The virgin Nana took a pomegranate from the tree watered by the blood of the slain Agdestris, and laid it in her bosom, and gave birth to the god Attis. The virgin daughter of a Mongol king awoke one night and found herself bathed in a great light, which caused her to give birth to Genghis Khan. Krishna was born of the virgin Devaka. Horus was born of the virgin Isis. Mercury was born of the virgin Maia. Romulus was born of the virgin Rhea Sylvia. For some reason, many religions force themselves to think of the birth canal as a one-way street, and even the Koran treats the Virgin Mary with reverence. However, this made no difference during the Crusades, when a papal army set out to recapture Bethlehem and Jerusalem from the Muslims, incidentally destroying many Jewish communities and sacking heretical Christian Byzantium along the way, and inflicted a massacre in the narrow streets of Jerusalem, where, according to the hysterical and gleeful chroniclers, the spilled blood reached up to the bridles of the horses. Some of these tempests of hatred and bigotry and bloodlust have passed away, though new ones are always impending in this area, but meanwhile a person can feel relatively unmolested in and around "Manger Square," which is the center, as its name suggests, of a tourist trap of such unrelieved tawdriness as to put Lourdes itself to shame. When I first visited this pitiful town, it was under the nominal control of a largely Christian Palestinian municipality, linked to one particular political dynasty identified with the Freij family. When I have seen it since, it has generally been under a brutal curfew imposed by the Israeli military authorities—whose presence on the West Bank is itself not unconnected with belief in certain ancient scriptural prophecies, though this time with a different promise made by a different god to a different people. Now comes the turn of still another religion. The forces of Hamas, who claim the whole of Palestine as an Islamic *wacjfor* holy dispensation sacred to Islam, have begun to elbow aside the Christians of

Bethlehem. Their leader, Mahmoud al-Zahar, has announced that all inhabitants of the Islamic state of Palestine will be expected to conform to Muslim law. In Bethlehem, it is now proposed that non-Muslims be subjected to the *al-Jeziya* tax, the historic levy imposed on *dhimmis* or unbelievers under the old Ottoman Empire. Female employees of the municipality are forbidden to greet male visitors with a handshake. In Gaza, a young woman named Yusra al-Azami was shot dead in April 2005, for the crime of sitting unchaperoned in a car with her fiancé. The young man escaped with only a vicious beating. The leaders of the Hamas "vice and virtue" squad justified this casual murder and torture by saying that there had been "suspicion of immoral behavior." In once secular Palestine, mobs of sexually repressed young men are conscripted to snoop around parked cars, and given permission to do what they like.

I once heard the late Abba Eban, one of Israel's more polished and thoughtful diplomats and statesmen, give a talk in New York. The first thing to strike the eye about the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, he said, was the ease of its solubility. From this arresting start he went on to say, with the authority of a former foreign minister and UN representative, that the essential point was a simple one. Two peoples of roughly equivalent size had a claim to the same land. The solution was, obviously, to create two states side by side. Surely something so self-evident was within the wit of man to encompass? And so it would have been, decades ago, if the messianic rabbis and mullahs and priests could have been kept out of it. But the exclusive claims to god-given authority, made by hysterical clerics on both sides and further stoked by Armageddon-minded Christians who hope to bring on the Apocalypse (preceded by the death or conversion of all Jews), have made the situation insufferable, and put the whole of humanity in the position of hostage to a quarrel that now features the threat of nuclear war. *Religion poisons everything*. As well as a menace to civilization, it has become a threat to human survival.

To come last to Baghdad. This is one of the greatest centers of learning and culture in history. It was here that some of the lost works of Aristotle and other Greeks ("lost" because the Christian authorities had burned some, suppressed others, and closed the schools of philosophy, on the grounds that there could have been no useful reflections on morality before the preaching of Jesus) were preserved, retranslated, and transmitted via Andalusia back to the ignorant "Christian" West. Baghdad's libraries and poets and architects were renowned. Many of these attainments took place under Muslim caliphs, who sometimes permitted and as often repressed their expression, but Baghdad also bears the traces of ancient Chaldean and Nestorian Christianity, and was one of the many centers of the Jewish diaspora. Until the late 1940s, it was home to as many Jews as were living in Jerusalem.

I am not here going to elaborate a position on the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in April 2003. I shall simply

say that those who regarded his regime as a "secular" one are deluding themselves. It is true that the Ba'ath Party was founded by a man named Michel Aflaq, a sinister Christian with a sympathy for fascism, and it is also true that membership of that party was open to all religions (though its Jewish membership was, I have every reason to think, limited). However, at least since his calamitous invasion of Iran in 1979, which led to furious accusations from the Iranian theocracy that he was an "infidel," Saddam Hussein had decked out his whole rule—which was based in any case on a tribal minority of the Sunni minority—as one of piety and jihad. (The Syrian Ba'ath Party, also based on a confessional fragment of society aligned with the Alawite minority, has likewise enjoyed a long and hypocritical relationship with the Iranian mullahs.) Saddam had inscribed the words "*Allahuh Akbar*"—"God Is Great"—on the Iraqi flag. He had sponsored a huge international conference of holy warriors and mullahs, and maintained very warm relations with their other chief state sponsor in the region, namely the genocidal government of Sudan. He had built the largest mosque in the region, and named it the "Mother of All Battles" mosque, complete with a Koran written in blood that he claimed to be his own. When launching his own genocidal campaign against the (mainly Sunni) people of Kurdistan—a campaign that involved the thoroughgoing use of chemical atrocity weapons and the murder and deportation of hundreds of thousands of people—he had called it "Operation *Anfal*," borrowing by this term a Koranic justification—"The Spoils" of sura 8—for the despoilment and destruction of nonbelievers. When the Coalition forces crossed the Iraqi border, they found Saddam's army dissolving like a sugar lump in hot tea, but met with some quite tenacious resistance from a paramilitary group, stiffened with foreign jihadists, called the Fedayeen Saddam. One of the jobs of this group was to execute anybody who publicly welcomed the Western intervention, and some revolting public hangings and mutilations were soon captured on video for all to see.

At a minimum, it can be agreed by all that the Iraqi people had endured much in the preceding thirty-five years of war and dictatorship, that the Saddam regime could not have gone on forever as an outlaw system within international law, and therefore that—whatever objections there might be to the actual means of "regime change"—the whole society deserved a breathing space in which to consider reconstruction and reconciliation. Not one single minute of breathing space was allowed.

Everybody knows the sequel. The supporters of al-Qaeda, led by a Jordanian jailbird named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, launched a frenzied campaign of murder and sabotage. They not only slew unveiled women and secular journalists and teachers. They not only set off bombs in Christian churches (Iraq's population is perhaps 2 percent Christian) and shot or maimed Christians who made and sold alcohol. They not only made a video of the mass shooting and throat-cutting of a contingent of Nepalese guest workers, who were assumed to be Hindu and thus beyond all consideration. These atrocities might be counted as more or

less routine. They directed the most toxic part of their campaign of terror at fellow Muslims. The mosques and funeral processions of the long-oppressed Shiite majority were blown up. Pilgrims coming long distances to the newly accessible shrines at Karbala and Najaf did so at the risk of their lives. In a letter to his leader Osama bin Laden, Zarqawi gave the two main reasons for this extraordinarily evil policy. In the first place, as he wrote, the Shiites were heretics who did not take the correct Salafist path of purity. They were thus a fit prey for the truly holy. In the second place, if a religious war could be induced within Iraqi society, the plans of the "crusader" West could be set at naught. The obvious hope was to ignite a counter-response from the Shia themselves, which would drive Sunni Arabs into the arms of their bin Ladenist "protectors." And, despite some noble appeals for restraint from the Shiite grand ayatollah Sistani, it did not prove very difficult to elicit such a response. Before long, Shia death squads, often garbed in police uniforms, were killing and torturing random members of the Sunni Arab faith. The surreptitious influence of the neighboring "Islamic Republic" of Iran was not difficult to detect, and in some Shia areas also it became dangerous to be an unveiled woman or a secular person. Iraq boasts quite a long history of intermarriage and inter-communal cooperation. But a few years of this hateful dialectic soon succeeded in creating an atmosphere of misery, distrust, hostility, and sect-based politics. Once again, *religion had poisoned everything*.

In all the cases I have mentioned, there were those who protested in the name of religion and who tried to stand athwart the rising tide of fanaticism and the cult of death. I can think of a handful of priests and bishops and rabbis and imams who have put humanity ahead of their own sect or creed. History gives us many other such examples, which I am going to discuss later on. But this is a compliment to humanism, not to religion. If it comes to that, these crises have also caused me, and many other atheists, to protest on behalf of Catholics suffering discrimination in Ireland, of Bosnian Muslims facing extermination in the Christian Balkans, of Shia Afghans and Iraqis being put to the sword by Sunni jihaddists, and vice versa, and numberless other such cases. To adopt such a stand is the elementary duty of a self-respecting human. But the general reluctance of clerical authorities to issue unambiguous condemnation, whether it is the Vatican in the case of Croatia or the Saudi or Iranian leaderships in the case of their respective confessions, is uniformly disgusting. And so is the willingness of each "flock" to revert to atavistic behavior under the least provocation.

No, Mr. Prager, I have not found it a prudent rule to seek help as the prayer meeting breaks up. And this, as I told you, is only the letter "B." In all these cases, anyone concerned with human safety or dignity would have to hope fervently for a mass outbreak of democratic and republican secularism.

I DID NOT HAVE TO TRAVEL to all these exotic places in order to see the poison doing its work. Long before the

critical day of September 11, 2001, I could sense that religion was beginning to reassert its challenge to civil society. When I am not operating as a tentative and amateur foreign correspondent, I lead a rather tranquil and orderly life: writing books and essays, teaching my students to love English literature, attending agreeable conferences of literary types, taking part in the transient arguments that arise in publishing and the academy. But even this rather sheltered existence has been subject to outrageous invasions and insults and challenges. On February 14, 1989, my friend Salman Rushdie was hit by a simultaneous death sentence and life sentence, for the crime of writing a work of fiction. To be more precise, the theocratic head of a foreign state—the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran—publicly offered money, in his own name, to suborn the murder of a novelist who was a citizen of another country. Those who were encouraged to carry out this bribed assassination scheme, which extended to "all those involved in the publication" of *The Satanic Verses*, were offered not just the cold cash but also a free ticket to paradise. It is impossible to imagine a greater affront to every value of free expression. The ayatollah had not read, and probably could not read, and in any case forbade everyone else to read, the novel. But he succeeded in igniting ugly demonstrations, among Muslims in Britain as well as across the world, where crowds burned the book and screamed for the author to be fed to the flames as well.

This episode—part horrifying and part grotesque—of course had its origins in the material or "real" world. The ayatollah, having flung away hundreds of thousands of young Iranian lives in an attempt to prolong the war which Saddam Hussein had started, and thereby to turn it into a victory for his own reactionary theology, had recently been forced to acknowledge reality and to agree to the United Nations cease-fire resolution that he had sworn he would drink poison before signing. He was in need, in other words, of an "issue." A group of reactionary Muslims in South Africa, who sat in the puppet parliament of the apartheid regime, had announced that if Mr. Rushdie attended a book fair in their country he would be killed. A fundamentalist group in Pakistan had shed blood on the streets. Khomeini had to prove that he could not be outdone by anybody.

As it happens, there are some statements allegedly made by the Prophet Muhammad, which are difficult to reconcile with Muslim teaching. Koranic scholars had attempted to square this circle by suggesting that, in these instances, the Prophet was accidentally taking dictation from Satan instead of from God. This ruse—which would not have disgraced the most sinuous school of medieval Christian apologetics—provided an excellent opportunity for a novelist to explore the relationship between holy writ and literature. But the literal mind does not understand the ironic mind, and sees it always as a source of danger. Moreover, Rushdie had been brought up as a Muslim and had an understanding of the Koran, which meant in effect that he was an apostate. And "apostasy," according to the Koran, is punishable by death. There is no right to change

religion, and all religious states have always insisted on harsh penalties for those who try it.

A number of serious attempts were made to kill Rushdie by religious death squads supported from Iranian embassies. His Italian and Japanese translators were criminally assaulted, apparently in one case in the absurd belief that the translator might know his whereabouts, and one of them was savagely mutilated as he lay dying. His Norwegian publisher was shot in the back several times with a high-velocity rifle and left for dead in the snow, but astonishingly survived. One might have thought that such arrogant state-sponsored homicide, directed at a lonely and peaceful individual who pursued a life devoted to language, would have called forth a general condemnation. But such was not the case. In considered statements, the Vatican, the archbishop of Canterbury, and the chief Sephardic rabbi of Israel all took a stand in sympathy with—the ayatollah. So did the cardinal archbishop of New York and many other lesser religious figures. While they usually managed a few words in which to deplore the resort to violence, all these men stated that the main problem raised by the publication of *The Satanic Verses* was not murder by mercenaries, but blasphemy. Some public figures not in holy orders, such as the Marxist writer John Berger, the Tory historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, and the doyen of espionage authors John Le Carre, also pronounced that Rushdie was the author of his own troubles, and had brought them on himself by "offending" a great monotheistic religion. There seemed nothing fantastic, to these people, in the British police having to defend an Indian-born ex-Muslim citizen from a concerted campaign to take his life in the name of god.

Sheltered as my own life normally is, I had a taste of this surreal situation when Mr. Rushdie came to Washington over the Thanksgiving weekend of 1993, in order to keep an appointment with President Clinton, and stayed for a night or two in my apartment. An enormous and forbidding security operation was necessary to bring this about, and when the visit was over I was asked to pay a visit to the Department of State. There I was informed by a senior official that believable "chatter" had been intercepted expressing the intention of revenge on me and on my family. I was advised to change my address and my telephone number, which seemed an unlikely way of avoiding reprisal. However, it did put me on notice of what I already knew. It is not possible for me to say, Well, you pursue your Shiite dream of a hidden imam and I pursue my study of Thomas Paine and George Orwell, and the world is big enough for both of us. The true believer cannot rest until the whole world bows the knee. Is it not obvious to all, say the pious, that religious authority is paramount, and that those who decline to recognize it have forfeited their right to exist? It was, as it happens, the *murderers* of the Shia who forced this point upon the world's attention a few years later. So ghastly had been the regime of the Taliban in Afghanistan, which slaughtered the Shiite Hazara population, that Iran itself had considered invading the country in 1999. And so great was the Taliban's addiction to profanity that it had methodically shelled and

destroyed one of the world's greatest cultural artifacts—the twin Buddha statues at Bamiyan, which in their magnificence showed the fusion of Hellenic and other styles in the Afghan past. But, pre-Islamic as they undoubtedly were, the statues were a standing insult to the Taliban and their al-Qaeda guests, and the reduction of Bamiyan to shards and rubble foreshadowed the incineration of two other twin structures, as well as almost three thousand human beings, in downtown Manhattan in the fall of 2001.

Everybody has their own 9/11 story: I shall skip over mine except to say that someone I slightly knew was flown into the wall of the Pentagon having managed to call her husband and give a description of her murderers and their tactics (and having learned from him that it was not a hijack and that she was going to die). From the roof of my building in Washington, I could see the smoke rising from the other side of the river, and I have never since passed the Capitol or the White House without thinking of what might have happened were it not for the courage and resourcefulness of the passengers on the fourth plane, who managed to bring it down in a Pennsylvanian field only twenty minutes' flying time from its destination.

Well, I was able to write in a further reply to Dennis Prager, now you have your answer. The nineteen suicide murderers of New York and Washington and Pennsylvania were beyond any doubt the most sincere believers on those planes. Perhaps we can hear a little less about how "people of faith" possess moral advantages that others can only envy. And what is to be learned from the jubilation and the ecstatic propaganda with which this great feat of fidelity has been greeted in the Islamic world? At the time, the United States had an attorney general named John Ashcroft, who had stated that America had "no king but Jesus" (a claim that was exactly two words too long). It had a president who wanted to hand over the care of the poor to "faith based" institutions. Might this not be a moment where the light of reason, and the defense of a society that separated church and state and valued free expression and free inquiry, be granted a point or two?

The disappointment was, and to me remains, acute. Within hours, the "reverends" Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell had announced that the immolation of their fellow creatures was a divine judgment on a secular society that tolerated homosexuality and abortion. At the solemn memorial service for the victims, held in the beautiful National Cathedral in Washington, an address was permitted from Billy Graham, a man whose record of opportunism and anti-Semitism is in itself a minor national disgrace. His absurd sermon made the claim that all the dead were now in paradise and would not return to us even if they could. I say absurd because it is impossible even in the most lenient terms to believe that a good number of sinful citizens had not been murdered by al-Qaeda that day. And there is no reason to believe that Billy Graham knew the current whereabouts of their souls, let alone their posthumous desires. But there was also something sinister in hearing

detailed claims to knowledge of paradise, of the sort that bin Laden himself was making on behalf of the assassins. Matters continued to deteriorate in the interval between the removal of the Taliban and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. A senior military official named General William Boykin announced that he had been vouchsafed a vision while serving earlier during the fiasco in Somalia. Apparently the face of Satan himself had been detected by some aerial photography of Mogadishu, but this had only increased the confidence of the general that his god was stronger than the evil deity of the opposition. At the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, it was revealed that Jewish and agnostic cadets were being viciously bullied by a group of unpunished "born again" cadres, who insisted that only those accepting Jesus as a personal savior were qualified to serve. The deputy commander of the academy sent out e-mails proselytizing for a national day of (Christian) prayer. A chaplain named MeLinda Morton, who complained about this hysteria and intimidation, was abruptly transferred to a faraway base in Japan. Meanwhile, empty-headed multiculturalism also contributed its portion, by among other means ensuring the distribution of cheap and mass-produced Saudi editions of the Koran, for use in America's prison system. These Wahhabi texts went even further than the original in recommending holy war against all Christians and Jews and secularists. To observe all this was to witness a kind of cultural suicide: an "assisted suicide" at which believers and unbelievers were both prepared to officiate.

It ought to have been pointed out at once that this sort of thing, as well as being unethical and unprofessional, was also flat-out unconstitutional and anti-American. James Madison, the author of the First Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting any law respecting an establishment of religion, was also an author of Article VI, which states unambiguously that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust." His later *Detached Memoranda* make it very plain that he opposed the government appointment of chaplains in the first place, either in the armed forces or at the opening ceremonies of Congress. "The establishment of the chaplainship to Congress is a palpable violation of equal rights, as well as of Constitutional principles." As to clerical presence in the armed forces, Madison wrote, "The object of this establishment is seducing; the motive to it is laudable. But is it not safer to adhere to a right principle, and trust to its consequences, than confide in the reasoning however specious in favor of a wrong one? Look thro' the armies and navies of the world, and say whether in the appointment of their ministers of religion, the spiritual interest of the flocks or the temporal interest of the Shepherd be most in view?" Anyone citing Madison today would very likely be thought either subversive or insane, and yet without him and Thomas Jefferson, coauthors of the Virginia Statute on Religious Freedom, the United States would have gone on as it was—with Jews prohibited from holding office in some states, Catholics in others, and Protestants in Maryland: the latter a state where "profane words concerning the Holy Trinity" were punishable by

torture, branding, and, at the third offense, "death without benefit of clergy." Georgia might have persisted in maintaining that its official state faith was "Protestantism"—whichever one of Luther's many hybrids that might have turned out to be.

As the debate over intervention in Iraq became more heated, positive torrents of nonsense poured from the pulpits. Most churches opposed the effort to remove Saddam Hussein, and the pope disgraced himself utterly by issuing a personal invitation to the wanted war criminal Tariq Aziz, a man responsible for the state murder of children. Not only was Aziz welcomed at the Vatican as the senior Catholic member of a ruling fascist party (not the first time that such an indulgence had been granted), he was then taken to Assisi for a personal session of prayer at the shrine of Saint Francis, who apparently used to lecture to birds. This, he must have thought, was altogether too easy. On the other side of the confessional span, some but not all American evangelicals thundered joyously about the prospect of winning the Muslim world for Jesus. (I say "some but not all" because one fundamentalist splinter group has since taken to picketing the funerals of American soldiers killed in Iraq, claiming that their murders are god's punishment for American homosexuality. One especially tasteful sign, waved in the faces of the mourners, is "Thank God for IEDs," the roadside bombs placed by equally anti-gay Muslim fascists. It is not my problem to decide which theology is the correct one here: I would say the chances of either being right are approximately the same.) Charles Stanley, whose weekly sermons from the First Baptist Church in Atlanta are watched by millions, could have been any demagogic imam as he said, "We should offer to serve the war effort in any way possible. God battles with people who oppose him, who fight against him and his followers." His organization's Baptist Press news service printed an article from a missionary exulting that "American foreign policy, and military might, have opened an opportunity for the gospel in the land of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Never to be outdone, Tim LaHaye decided to go even further. Best-known as the coauthor of the best-selling *Left Behind* pulp novel series, which readies the average American for the "rapture" and then for Armageddon, he spoke of Iraq as "a focal point of end-time events." Other biblical enthusiasts tried to link Saddam Hussein with the wicked King Nebuchadnezzar of ancient Babylon, a comparison that the dictator himself would probably have approved, given his rebuilding of the old walls at Babylon with bricks that had his name inscribed on every one of them. Thus, instead of a rational discussion about the best way to contain and defeat religious fanaticism, one had the mutual reinforcement of two forms of that mania: the jihadist assault reconjured the bloodstained specter of the Crusaders. In this respect, religion is not unlike racism. One version of it inspires and provokes the other. I was once asked another trick question, slightly more searching than Dennis Prager's, that was designed to uncover my level of latent prejudice. You are on a subway platform in New York, late at night, in a deserted station. Suddenly a group of a dozen black men

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appears. Do you stay where you are or move to the exit? I was able again to reply that I had had this exact experience. Waiting alone for a train, well after midnight, I had been suddenly joined by a crew of repairmen exiting the tunnel with their tools and work gloves. All of them were black. I felt instantly safer, and moved toward them. I have no idea what their religious affiliation was. But in every other case that I have cited, religion has been an enormous multiplier of tribal suspicion and hatred, with members of each group talking of the other in precisely the tones of the bigot. The Christians and Jews eat defiled pig meat and swill poisonous alcohol. Buddhist and Muslim Sri Lankans blamed the wine-oriented Christmas celebrations of 2004 for the immediately following tsunami. Catholics are dirty and have too many children. Muslims breed like rabbits and wipe their bottoms with the wrong hand. Jews have lice in their beards and seek the blood of Christian children to add flavor and zest to their Passover matzos. And so it goes on.

## Chapter Three

### A Short Digression on the Pig; or, Why Heaven Hates Ham

All religions have a tendency to feature some dietary injunction or prohibition, whether it is the now lapsed Catholic injunction to eat fish on Fridays, or the adoration by Hindus of the cow as a consecrated and invulnerable animal (the government of India even offered to import and protect all the cattle facing slaughter as a result of the bovine encephalitic, or "mad cow," plague that swept Europe in the 1990s), or the refusal by some other Eastern cults to consume any animal flesh, or to injure any other creature be it rat or flea. But the oldest and most tenacious of all fetishes is the hatred and even fear of the pig. It emerged in primitive Judaea, and was for centuries one of the ways—the other being circumcision—by which Jews could be distinguished.

Even though sura 5.60 of the Koran condemns particularly Jews but also other unbelievers as having been turned into pigs and monkeys—a very intense theme in recent Salafist Muslim preaching—and the Koran describes the flesh of swine as unclean or even "abominable," Muslims appear to see nothing ironic in the adoption of this uniquely Jewish taboo. Real horror of the porcine is manifest all over the Islamic world. One good instance would be the continued prohibition of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, one of the most charming and useful fables of modern times, of the reading of which Muslim schoolchildren are deprived. I have perused some of the solemn prohibition orders written by Arab education ministries, which are so stupid that they fail to notice the evil and dictatorial role played by the pigs in the story itself.

Orwell actually did dislike pigs, as a consequence of his failure as a small farmer, and this revulsion is shared by many adults who have had to work with these difficult animals in agricultural conditions. Crammed together in sties, pigs tend to act swinishly, as it were, and to have noisy and nasty fights. It is not unknown for them to eat their own young and even their own excrement, while their tendency to random and loose gallantry is often painful to the more fastidious eye. But it has often been noticed that pigs left to their own devices, and granted sufficient space, will keep themselves very clean, arrange little bowers, bring up families, and engage in social interaction with other pigs. The creatures also display many signs of intelligence, and it has been calculated that the crucial ratio—between brain weight and body weight—is almost as high with them as it is in dolphins. There is great adaptability between the pig and its environment, as witness wild boars and "feral pigs" as opposed to the placid porkers and frisky piglets of our more immediate experience. But the cloven hoof, or trotter, became a sign of diabolism to the fearful, and I daresay that it is easy to surmise which came first—the devil or the pig. It would be merely boring and idiotic to wonder how the designer of all things conceived such a versatile creature and then commanded his higher-mammal creation to avoid it

altogether or risk his eternal displeasure. But many otherwise intelligent mammals affect the belief that heaven hates ham..

I hope that you have guessed by now what we know in any case—that this fine beast is one of our fairly close cousins. It shares a great deal of our DNA, and there have lately been welcome transplants of skin, heart valves, and kidneys from pigs to humans. If—which I heartily trust does not happen—a new Dr. Moreau could corrupt recent advances in cloning and create a hybrid, a "pig-man" is widely feared as the most probable outcome. Meanwhile, almost everything about the pig is useful, from its nutritious and delicious meat to its tanned hide for leather and its bristles for brushes. In Upton Sinclair's graphic novel of the Chicago slaughterhouse, *The Jungle*, it is agonizing to read about the way that pigs are borne aloft on hooks, screaming as their throats are cut. Even the strongest nerves of the most hardened workers are shaken by the experience. There is something about that shriek . . .

To press this a little further, one may note that children if left unmolested by rabbis and imams are very drawn to pigs, especially to baby ones, and that firefighters in general do not like to eat roast pork or crackling. The barbaric vernacular word for roasted human in New Guinea and elsewhere was "long pig": I have never had the relevant degustative experience myself, but it seems that we do, if eaten, taste very much like pigs.

This helps to make nonsense of the usual "secular" explanations of the original Jewish prohibition. It is argued that the ban was initially rational, since pig meat in hot climates can become rank and develop the worms of trichinosis. This objection—which perhaps does apply in the case of non-kosher shellfish—is absurd when applied to the actual conditions. First, trichinosis is found in all climates, and in fact occurs more in cold than in hot ones. Second, ancient Jewish settlements in the land of Canaan can easily be distinguished by archaeologists by the absence of pig bones in their rubbish tips, as opposed to the presence of such bones in the middens of other communities. The non-Jews did not sicken and die from eating pork, in other words. (Quite apart from anything else, if they *had* died for this reason there would have been no need for the god of Moses to urge their slaughter by non-pig-eaters.)

There must therefore be another answer to the conundrum. I claim my own solution as original, though without the help of Sir James Frazer and the great Ibn Warraq I might not have hit upon it. According to many ancient authorities, the attitude of early Semites to swine was one of reverence as much as disgust. The eating of pig flesh was considered as something special, even privileged and ritualistic. (This mad confusion between the sacred and the profane is found in all faiths at all times.) The simultaneous attraction and repulsion derived from an anthropomorphic root: the look of the pig, and the taste of the pig, and the dying yells of

the pig, and the evident intelligence of the pig, were too uncomfortably reminiscent of the human.

Porcophobia—and porcophilia—thus probably originate in a nighttime of human sacrifice and even cannibalism at which the "holy" texts often do more than hint. Nothing optional—from homosexuality to adultery—is ever made punishable unless those who do the prohibiting (and exact the fierce punishments) have a repressed desire to participate. As Shakespeare put it in *King Lear*, the policeman who lashes the whore has a hot need to use her for the very offense for which he plies the lash.

Porcophilia can also be used for oppressive and repressive purposes. In medieval Spain, where Jews and Muslims were compelled on pain of death and torture to convert to Christianity, the religious authorities quite rightly suspected that many of the conversions were not sincere. Indeed, the Inquisition arose partly from the holy dread that secret infidels were attending Mass—where of course, and even more disgustingly, they were pretending to eat human flesh and drink human blood, in the person of Christ himself. Among the customs that arose in consequence was the offering, at most events formal and informal, of a plate of charcuterie. Those who have been fortunate enough to visit Spain, or any good Spanish restaurant, will be familiar with the gesture of hospitality: literally dozens of pieces of differently cured, differently sliced pig. But the grim origin of this lies in a constant effort to sniff out heresy, and to be unsmilingly watchful for giveaway expressions of distaste. In the hands of eager Christian fanatics, even the *toothsome Jamon Iberico* could be pressed into service as a form of torture.

Today, ancient stupidity is upon us again. Muslim zealots in Europe are demanding that the Three Little Pigs, and Miss Piggy, *Winnie-the-Pooh's* Piglet, and other traditional pets and characters be removed from the innocent gaze of their children. The mirthless cretins of jihad have probably not read enough to know of the Empress of Blandings, and of the Earl of Emsworth's infinitely renewable delight in the splendid pages of the incomparable author Mr. Whiffle, *The Care of the Pig*, but there will be trouble when they get that far. An old statue of a wild boar, in an arboretum in Middle England, has already been threatened with mindless Islamic vandalism.

In microcosm, this apparently trivial fetish shows how religion and faith and superstition distort our whole picture of the world. The pig is so close to us, and has been so handy to us in so many respects, that a strong case is now made by humanists that it should not be factory-farmed, confined, separated from its young, and forced to live in its own ordure. All other considerations to one side, the resulting pink and spongy meat *is* somewhat rebarbative. But this is a decision that we can make in the plain light of reason and compassion, as extended to fellow creatures and relatives, and not as a result of incantations from Iron Age campfires where much worse offenses were celebrated in the name of god. "Pig's head on a stick," says the nervous

but stouthearted Ralph in the face of the buzzing, suppurating idol (first killed and then worshipped) that has been set up by cruel, frightened schoolboys in *Lord of the Flies*. "Pig's head on a stick." And he was more right than he could have known, and much wiser than his elders as well as his delinquent juniors.

## Chapter Four

### A Note on Health, to Which Religion Can Be Hazardous

In dark ages people are best guided by religion, as in a pitch-black night a blind man is the best guide; he knows the roads and paths better than a man who can see. When daylight comes, however, it is foolish to use blind old men as guides.

—HEINRICH HEINE, *GEDANKEN UND EINFALLE*

In the fall of 2001 I was in Calcutta with the magnificent photographer Sebastiao Salgado, a Brazilian genius whose studies with the camera have made vivid the lives of migrants, war victims, and those workers who toil to extract primary products from mines and quarries and forests. On this occasion, he was acting as an envoy of UNICEF and promoting his cause as a crusader—in the positive sense of that term—against the scourge of polio. Thanks to the work of inspired and enlightened scientists like Jonas Salk, it is now possible to immunize children against this ghastly malady for a negligible cost: the few cents or pennies that it takes to administer two drops of oral vaccine to the mouth of an infant. Advances in medicine had managed to put the fear of smallpox behind us, and it was confidently expected that another year would do the same for polio. Humanity itself had seemingly united on this proposition. In several countries, including El Salvador, warring combatants had proclaimed cease-fires in order to allow the inoculation teams to move freely. Extremely poor and backward countries had mustered the resources to get the good news to every village: no more children need be killed, or made useless and miserable, by this hideous disease. Back home in Washington, where that year many people were still fearfully staying indoors after the trauma of 9/11, my youngest daughter was going dauntlessly door to door on Halloween, piping "Trick or Treat for UNICEF" and healing or saving, with every fistful of small change, children she would never meet. One had that rare sense of participating in an entirely positive enterprise.

The people of Bengal, and particularly the women, were enthusiastic and inventive. I remember one committee meeting, where staunch Calcutta hostesses planned without embarrassment to team up with the city's prostitutes to spread the word into the farthest corners of society. Bring your children, no questions asked, and let them swallow the two drops of fluid. Someone knew of an elephant a few miles out of town that might be hired to lead a publicity parade. Everything was going well: in one of the poorest cities and states of the world there was to be a new start. And then we began to hear of a rumor. In some outlying places, Muslim die-hards were spreading the story that the droplets were a plot. If you took this sinister Western medicine, you would be stricken by impotence and diarrhea (a forbidding and depressing combination).

This was a problem, because the drops have to be administered twice—the second time as a booster and

confirmation of immunity— and because it takes only a few uninoculated people to allow the disease to survive and revive, and to spread back through contact and the water supply. As with smallpox, eradication must be utter and complete. I wondered as I left Calcutta if West Bengal would manage to meet the deadline and declare itself polio-free by the end of the next year. That would leave only pockets of Afghanistan and one or two other inaccessible regions, already devastated by religious fervor, before we could say that another ancient tyranny of illness had been decisively overthrown.

In 2005 I learned of one outcome. In northern Nigeria—a country that had previously checked in as provisionally polio-free—a group of Islamic religious figures issued a ruling, or fatwa, that declared the polio vaccine to be a conspiracy by the United States (and, amazingly, the United Nations) against the Muslim faith. The drops were designed, said these mullahs, to sterilize the true believers. Their intention and effect was genocidal. Nobody was to swallow them, or administer them to infants. Within months, polio was back, and not just in northern Nigeria. Nigerian travelers and pilgrims had already taken it as far as Mecca, and spread it back to several other polio-free countries, including three African ones and also faraway Yemen. The entire boulder would have to be rolled back right up to the top of the mountain.

You may say that this is an "isolated" case, which would be a grimly apt way of putting it. But you would be mistaken. Would you care to see my video of the advice given by Cardinal Alfonso Lopez de Trujillo, the Vatican's president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, carefully warning his audience that all condoms are secretly made with many microscopic holes, through which the AIDS virus can pass? Close your eyes and try to picture what you might say if you had the authority to inflict the greatest possible suffering in the least number of words. Consider the damage that such a dogma has caused: presumably those holes permit the passage of other things too, which rather destroys the point of a condom in the first place. To make such a statement in Rome is wicked enough. But translate the message into the language of poor and stricken countries and see what happens. During carnival season in Brazil, the auxiliary bishop of Rio de Janeiro, Rafael Llano Cifuentes, told his congregation in a sermon that "the church is against condom use. Sexual relations between a man and a woman have to be natural. I have never seen a little dog using a condom during sexual intercourse with another dog." Senior clerical figures in several other countries—Cardinal Obando y Bravo of Nicaragua, the archbishop of Nairobi in Kenya, Cardinal Emmanuel Wamala of Uganda—have all told their flocks that condoms transmit AIDS. Cardinal Wamala, indeed, has opined that women who die of AIDS rather than employ latex protection should be considered as martyrs (though presumably this martyrdom must take place within the confines of marriage).

The Islamic authorities have been no better and sometimes worse. In 1995, the Council of Ulemas in Indonesia urged that condoms only be made available to married couples, and on prescription. In Iran, a worker found to be HIV-positive can lose his job, and doctors and hospitals have the right to refuse treatment to AIDS patients. An official of Pakistan's AIDS Control Program told *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2005 that the problem was smaller in his country because of "better social and Islamic values." This, in a state where the law allows a woman to be *sentenced* to be gang-raped in order to expiate the "shame" of a crime committed by her brother. This is the old religious combination of repression and denial: a plague like AIDS is assumed to be unmentionable because the teachings of the Koran are enough in themselves to inhibit premarital intercourse, drug use, adultery, and prostitution. Even a very brief visit to, say, Iran, will demonstrate the opposite. It is the mullahs themselves who profit from hypocrisy by licensing "temporary marriages," in which wedding certificates are available for a few hours, sometimes in specially designated houses, with a divorce declaration ready to hand at the conclusion of business. You could almost call it prostitution ... The last time I was offered such a bargain it was just outside the ugly shrine to the Ayatollah Khomeini in south Tehran. But veiled and burqa-clad women, infected by their husbands with the virus, are expected to die in silence. It is a certainty that millions of other harmless and decent people will die, very miserably and quite needlessly, all over the world as a result of this obscurantism.

The attitude of religion to medicine, like the attitude of religion to science, is always necessarily problematic and very often necessarily hostile. A modern believer can say and even believe that his faith is quite compatible with science and medicine, but the awkward fact will always be that both things have a tendency to break religion's monopoly, and have often been fiercely resisted for that reason. What happens to the faith healer and the shaman when any poor citizen can see the full effect of drugs and surgeries, administered without ceremonies or mystifications? Roughly the same thing as happens to the rainmaker when the climatologist turns up, or to the diviner from the heavens when schoolteachers get hold of elementary telescopes. Plagues of antiquity were held to be punishment from the gods, which did much to strengthen the hold of the priesthood and much to encourage the burning of infidels and heretics who were thought—in an alternative explanation—to be spreading disease by witchcraft or else poisoning the wells. We may make allowances for the orgies of stupidity and cruelty that were indulged in before humanity had a clear concept of the germ theory of disease. Most of the "miracles" of the New Testament have to do with healing, which was of such great importance in a time when even minor illness was often the end. (Saint Augustine himself said that he would not have believed in Christianity if it were not for the miracles.) Scientific critics of religion such as Daniel Dennett have been generous enough to point out that apparently useless healing rituals may even have helped

people get better, in that we know how important morale can be in aiding the body to fight injury and infection. But that would be an excuse only available in retrospect. By the time Dr. Jenner had discovered that a cowpox vaccine could ward off smallpox, this excuse had become void. Yet Timothy Dwight, a president of Yale University and to this day one of America's most respected "divines," was opposed to the smallpox vaccination because he regarded it as an interference with god's design. And this mentality is still heavily present, long after its pretext and justification in human ignorance has vanished.

It is interesting, and suggestive, that the archbishop of Rio makes his analogy with dogs. They do not trouble to roll on a condom: who are we to quarrel with their fidelity to "nature"? In the recent division in the Anglican Church over homosexuality and ordination, several bishops made the fatuous point that homosexuality is "unnatural" because it does not occur in other species. Leave aside the fundamental absurdity of this observation: are humans part of "nature" or not? Or, if they chance to be homosexual, are they created in god's image or not? Leave aside the well-attested fact that numberless kinds of birds and mammals and primates do engage in homosexual play. Who are the clerics to interpret nature? They have shown themselves quite unable to do so. A condom is, quite simply, a necessary but not a sufficient condition for avoiding the transmission of AIDS. All qualified authorities, including those who state that abstinence is even better, are agreed on this. Homosexuality is present in all societies, and its incidence would appear to be part of human "design." We must perforce confront these facts as we find them. We now know that the bubonic plague was spread not by sin or moral backsliding but by rats and fleas. Archbishop Lancelot Andrewes, during the celebrated "Black Death" in London in 1665, noticed uneasily that the horror fell upon those who prayed and kept the faith as well as upon those who did not. He came perilously close to stumbling upon a real point. As I was writing this chapter, an argument broke out in my hometown of Washington, D.C. The human papillomavirus (HPV) has long been known as a sexually transmitted infection that, at its worst, can cause cervical cancer in women. A vaccine is now available—these days, vaccines are increasingly swiftly developed—not to cure this malady but to immunize women against it. But there are forces in the administration who oppose the adoption of this measure on the grounds that it fails to discourage premarital sex. To accept the spread of cervical cancer in the name of god is no different, morally or intellectually, from sacrificing these women on a stone altar and thanking the deity for giving us the sexual impulse and then condemning it. We do not know how many people in Africa have died or will die because of the AIDS virus, which was isolated and became treatable, in a great feat of humane scientific research, very soon after it made its lethal appearance. On the other hand, we do know that having sex with a virgin—one of the more popular local "cures"—does not in fact prevent or banish the infection. And we also know that the use of condoms can at least contribute, as a form of prophylaxis, to the limitation and

containment of the virus. We are not dealing, as early missionaries might have liked to believe, with witch doctors and savages who resist the boons that the missionaries bring. We are instead dealing with the Bush administration, which, in a supposedly secular republic in the twenty-first century, refuses to share its foreign aid budget with charities and clinics that offer advice on family planning. At least two major and established religions, with millions of adherents in Africa, believe that the cure is much worse than the disease. They also harbor the belief that the AIDS plague is in some sense a verdict from heaven upon sexual deviance—in particular upon homosexuality. A single stroke of Ockham's potent razor eviscerates this half-baked savagery: female homosexuals not only do not contract AIDS (except if they are unlucky with a transfusion or a needle), they are also much freer of *all* venereal infection than even heterosexuals. Yet clerical authorities persistently refuse to be honest about even the existence of the lesbian. In doing so, they further demonstrate that religion continues to pose an urgent threat to public health.

I pose a hypothetical question. As a man of some fifty-seven years of age, I am discovered sucking the penis of a baby boy. I ask you to picture your own outrage and revulsion. Ah, but I have my explanation all ready. I am a mohel: an appointed circumciser and foreskin remover. My authority comes from an ancient text, which commands me to take a baby boy's penis in my hand, cut around the prepuce, and complete the action by taking his penis in my mouth, sucking off the foreskin, and spitting out the amputated flap along with a mouthful of blood and saliva. This practice has been abandoned by most Jews, either because of its unhygienic nature or its disturbing associations, but it still persists among the sort of Hasidic fundamentalists who hope for the Second Temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem. To them, the primitive rite of the *peri'ah metsitsah* is part of the original and unbreakable covenant with god. In New York City in the year 2005, the ritual, as performed by a fifty-seven-year-old mohel, was found to have given genital herpes to several small boys, and to have caused the deaths of at least two of them. In normal circumstances, the disclosure would have led the public health department to forbid the practice and the mayor to denounce it. But in the capital of the modern world, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, such was not the case. Instead, Mayor Bloomberg overrode the reports by distinguished Jewish physicians who had warned of the danger of the custom, and told his health care bureaucracy to postpone any verdict. The crucial thing, he said, was to be sure that the free exercise of religion was not being infringed. In a public debate with Peter Steinfeld, the liberal Catholic "religion editor" of the New York Times, I was told the same thing.

It happened to be election year in New York for the mayor, which often explains a lot. But this pattern recurs in other denominations and other states and cities, as well as in other countries. Across a wide swath of animist and Muslim Africa, young girls are subjected to the hell of

circumcision and infibulations, which involves the slicing off of the labia and the clitoris, often with a sharp stone, and then the stitching up of the vaginal opening with strong twine, not to be removed until it is broken by male force on the bridal night. Compassion and biology allow for a small aperture to be left, meanwhile, for the passage of menstrual blood. The resulting stench, pain, humiliation, and misery exceed anything that can be easily imagined, and inevitably result in infection, sterility, shame, and the death of many women and babies in childbirth. No society would tolerate such an insult to its womanhood and therefore to its survival if the foul practice was not holy and sanctified. But then, no New Yorker would permit atrocities against infants if not for the same consideration. Parents professing to believe the nonsensical claims of "Christian Science" have been accused, but not always convicted, of denying urgent medical care to their offspring. Parents who imagine themselves to be "Jehovah's Witnesses" have refused permission for their children to receive blood transfusions. Parents who imagine that a man named Joseph Smith was led to a set of buried golden tablets have married their underage "Mormon" daughters to favored uncles and brothers-in-law, who sometimes have older wives already. The Shia fundamentalists in Iran lowered the age of "consent" to nine, perhaps in admiring emulation of the age of the youngest "wife" of the "Prophet" Muhammad. Hindu child brides in India are flogged, and sometimes burned alive, if the pathetic dowry they bring is judged to be too small. The Vatican, and its vast network of dioceses, has in the past decade alone been forced to admit complicity in a huge racket of child rape and child torture, mainly but by no means exclusively homosexual, in which known pederasts and sadists were shielded from the law and reassigned to parishes where the pickings of the innocent and defenseless were often richer. In Ireland alone—once an unquestioning disciple of Holy Mother Church—it is now estimated that the *unmolested* children of religious schools were very probably the minority.

Now, religion professes a special role in the protection and instruction of children. "Woe to him," says the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, "who harms a child." The New Testament has Jesus informing us that one so guilty would be better off at the bottom of the sea, and with a millstone around his neck at that. But both in theory and in practice, religion uses the innocent and the defenseless for the purposes of experiment. By all means let an observant Jewish adult male have his raw-cut penis placed in the mouth of a rabbi. (That would be legal, at least in New York.) By all means let grown women who distrust their clitoris or their labia have them sawn away by some other wretched adult female. By all means let Abraham offer to commit suicide to prove his devotion to the Lord or his belief in the voices he was hearing in his head. By all means let devout parents deny themselves the succor of medicine when in acute pain and distress. By all means—for all I care—let a priest sworn to celibacy be a promiscuous homosexual. By all means let a congregation that believes in whipping out the devil choose a new grown-up sinner each week and lash him until he or

she bleeds. By all means let anyone who believes in creationism instruct his fellows during lunch breaks. But the conscription of the unprotected child for these purposes is something that even the most dedicated secularist can safely describe as a sin.

I do not set myself up as a moral exemplar, and would be swiftly knocked down if I did, but if I was suspected of raping a child, or torturing a child, or infecting a child with venereal disease, or selling a child into sexual or any other kind of slavery, I might consider committing suicide whether I was guilty or not. If I had actually committed the offense, I would welcome death in any form that it might take. This revulsion is innate in any healthy person, and does not need to be taught. Since religion has proved itself uniquely delinquent on the one subject where moral and ethical authority might be counted as universal and absolute, I think we are entitled to at least three provisional conclusions. The first is that religion and the churches are manufactured, and that this salient fact is too obvious to ignore. The second is that ethics and morality are quite independent of faith, and cannot be derived from it. The third is that religion is—because it claims a special divine exemption for its practices and beliefs—not just amoral but immoral. The ignorant psychopath or brute who mistreats his children must be punished but can be understood. Those who claim a heavenly warrant for the cruelty have been tainted by evil, and also constitute far more of a danger.

IN THE CITY OF JERUSALEM, there is a special ward in the mental hospital for those who represent a special danger to themselves and others. These deluded patients are the sufferers from the "Jerusalem syndrome." Police and security officers are trained to recognize them, though their mama is often concealed behind a mask of deceptively beatific calm. They have come to the holy city in order to announce themselves as the Messiah or redeemer, or to proclaim the end of days. The connection between religious faith and mental disorder is, from the viewpoint of the tolerant and the "multicultural," both very obvious and highly unmentionable. If someone murders his children and then says that god ordered him to do it, we might find him not guilty by reason of insanity but he would be incarcerated nonetheless. If someone lives in a cave and claims to be seeing visions and experiencing prophetic dreams, we may leave him alone until he turns out to be planning, in a nonphantasmal way, the joy of suicide bombing. If someone announces himself to be god's anointed, and begins stockpiling Kool-Aid and weapons and helping himself to the wives and daughters of his acolytes, we raise a bit more than a skeptical eyebrow. But if these things can be preached under the protection of an established religion, we are expected to take them at face value. All three monotheisms, just to take the most salient example, praise Abraham for being willing to hear voices and then to take his son Isaac for a long and rather mad and gloomy walk. And then the caprice by which his murderous hand is finally stayed is written down as divine mercy.

The relationship between physical health and mental health is now well understood to have a strong connection to the sexual function, or dysfunction. Can it be a coincidence, then, that all religions claim the right to legislate in matters of sex? The principal way in which believers inflict on themselves, on each other, and on nonbelievers, has always been their claim to monopoly in this sphere. Most religions (with the exception of the few cults that actually permit or encourage it) do not have to bother much with enforcing the taboo on incest. Like murder and theft, this is usually found to be abhorrent to humans without any further explanation. But merely to survey the history of sexual dread and proscription, as codified by religion, is to be met with a very disturbing connection between extreme prurience and extreme repression. Almost every sexual impulse has been made the occasion for prohibition, guilt, and shame. Manual sex, oral sex, anal sex, non-missionary position sex: to name it is to discover a fearsome ban upon it. Even in modern and hedonistic America, several states legally define "sodomy" as that which is not directed at face-to-face heterosexual procreation.

This raises gigantic objections to the argument from "design," whether we choose to call that design "intelligent" or not. Clearly, the human species is designed to experiment with sex. No less clearly, this fact is well-known to the priesthoods. When Dr. Samuel Johnson had completed the first real dictionary of the English language, he was visited by a delegation of respectable old ladies who wished to congratulate him for not including any indecent words. His response—which was that he was interested to see that the ladies had been looking them up—contains almost all that needs to be said on this point. Orthodox Jews conduct congress by means of a hole in the sheet, and subject their women to ritual baths to cleanse the stain of menstruation. Muslims subject adulterers to public lashings with a whip. Christians used to lick their lips while examining women for signs of witchcraft. I need not go on in this vein: any reader of this book will know of a vivid example, or will simply guess my meaning.

A consistent proof that religion is man-made and anthropomorphic can also be found in the fact that it is usually "man" made, in the sense of masculine, as well. The holy book in the longest continuous use—the Talmud—commands the observant one to thank his maker every day that he was not born a woman. (This raises again the insistent question: who but a slave thanks his master for what his master has decided to do without bothering to consult him?) The Old Testament, as Christians condescendingly call it, has woman cloned from man for his use and comfort. The New Testament has Saint Paul expressing both fear and contempt for the female. Throughout all religious texts, there is a primitive fear that half the human race is simultaneously defiled and unclean, and yet is also a temptation to sin that is impossible to resist. Perhaps this explains the hysterical cult of virginity and of a Virgin, and the dread of the female form and of female reproductive functions? And there may be someone

who can explain the sexual and other cruelties of the religious without any reference to the obsession with celibacy, but that someone will not be me. I simply laugh when I read the Koran, with its endless prohibitions on sex and its corrupt promise of infinite debauchery in the life to come: it is like seeing through the "let's pretend" of a child, but without the indulgence that comes from watching the innocent at play. The homicidal lunatics—rehearsing to be genocidal lunatics—of 9/11 were perhaps tempted by virgins, but it is far more revolting to contemplate that, like so many of their fellow jihadists, they *were* virgins. Like monks of old, the fanatics are taken early from their families, taught to despise their mothers and sisters, and come to adulthood without ever having had a normal conversation, let alone a normal relationship, with a woman. This is disease by definition. Christianity is too repressed to offer sex in paradise—indeed it has never been able to evolve a tempting heaven at all—but it has been lavish in its promise of sadistic and everlasting punishment for sexual backsliders, which is nearly as revealing in making the same point in a different way. A SPECIAL SUBGENRE of modern literature is the memoir of a man or woman who once underwent a religious education. The modern world is now sufficiently secular for some of these authors to attempt to be funny about what they underwent, and what they were expected to believe. However, such books tend necessarily to be written by those with enough fortitude to have survived the experience. We have no way to quantify the damage done by telling tens of millions of children that masturbation will make them blind, or that impure thoughts will lead to an eternity of torment, or that members of other faiths including members of their own families will burn, or that venereal disease will result from kisses. Nor can we hope to quantify the damage done by holy instructors who rammed home these lies and accompanied them with floggings and rapes and public humiliations. Some of those who "rest in unvisited tombs" may have contributed to the good of the world, but those who preached hatred and fear and guilt and who ruined innumerable childhoods should have been thankful that the hell they preached was only one among their wicked falsifications, and that they were not sent to rot there.

VIOLENT, IRRATIONAL, INTOLERANT, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children: organized religion ought to have a great deal on its conscience. There is one more charge to be added to the bill of indictment. With a necessary part of its collective mind, religion looks forward to the destruction of the world. By this I do not mean it "looks forward" in the purely eschatological sense of anticipating the end. I mean, rather, that it openly or covertly wishes that end to occur. Perhaps half aware that its unsupported arguments are not entirely persuasive, and perhaps uneasy about its own greedy accumulation of temporal power and wealth, religion has never ceased to proclaim the Apocalypse and the day of judgment. This has been a constant trope, ever since the first witch doctors and shamans learned to predict eclipses and to use their half-

baked celestial knowledge to terrify the ignorant. It stretches from the epistles of Saint Paul, who clearly thought and hoped that time was running out for humanity, through the deranged fantasies of the book of Revelation, which were at least memorably written by the alleged Saint John the Divine on the Greek island of Patmos, to the best-selling pulp-fiction *Left Behind* series, which, ostensibly "authored" by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, was apparently generated by the old expedient of letting two orangutans loose on a word processor:

The blood continued to rise. Millions of birds flocked into the area and feasted on the remains ... and the winepress was trampled outside the city, and blood came out of the winepress, up to the horse's bridles, for one thousand six hundred furlongs.

This is sheer manic relish, larded with half-quotations. More reflectively, but hardly less regrettably, it can be found in Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," which dwells on the same winepress, and in Robert Oppenheimer's murmur as he watched the first nuclear detonation at Alamogordo, New Mexico, and heard himself quoting the Hindu epic the Bhagavad Gita: "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." One of the very many connections between religious belief and the sinister, spoiled, selfish childhood of our species is the repressed desire to see everything smashed up and ruined and brought to naught. This tantrum-need is coupled with two other sorts of "guilty joy," or, as the Germans say, *schadenfreude*. First, one's own death is canceled—or perhaps repaid or compensated—by the obliteration of all others. Second, it can always be egotistically hoped that one will be personally spared, gathered contentedly to the bosom of the mass exterminator, and from a safe place observe the sufferings of those less fortunate. Tertullian, one of the many church fathers who found it difficult to give a persuasive account of paradise, was perhaps clever in going for the lowest possible common denominator and promising that one of the most intense pleasures of the afterlife would be endless contemplation of the tortures of the damned. He spoke more truly than he knew in evoking the man-made character of faith.

As in all cases, the findings of science are far more awe-inspiring than the rantings of the godly. The history of the cosmos begins, if we use the word "time" to mean anything at all, about twelve billion years ago. (If we use the word "time" wrongly, we shall end up with the infantile computation of the celebrated Archbishop James Ussher of Armagh, who calculated that the earth—"the earth" alone, mind you, not the cosmos—had its birthday on Saturday, October 22, in 4004 BC, at six in the afternoon. This dating was endorsed by William Jennings Bryan, a former American secretary of state and two-time Democratic presidential nominee, in courtroom testimony in the third decade of the twentieth century.) The true age of the sun and its orbiting planets—one of them destined to harbor life and all the others doomed to lifelessness—is perhaps four and a half billion years and subject to revision. This

particular microscopic solar system most probably has at least that long again to run its fiery course: the life expectancy of our sun is a solid five billion more years. However, mark your calendar. At around that point, it will emulate millions of other suns and explosively mutate into a swollen "red giant," causing the earth's oceans to boil and extinguishing all possibility of life in any form. No description by any prophet or visionary has even begun to picture the awful intensity and irrevocability of that moment. One has at least some pitiful self-centered reason not to fear undergoing it: on current projections the biosphere will very probably have been destroyed by different and slower sorts of warming and heating in the meantime. As a species on earth, according to many sanguine experts, we do not have many more eons ahead of us.

With what contempt and suspicion, then, must one regard those who are not willing to wait, and who beguile themselves and terrify others—especially the children, as usual—with horrific visions of apocalypse, to be followed by stern judgment from the one who supposedly placed us in this inescapable dilemma to begin with. We may laugh now at the foam-flecked hell-and-damnation preachers who loved to shrivel young souls with pornographic depictions of eternal torture, but this phenomenon has reappeared in a more troubling form with the holy alliance between the believers and what they can borrow or steal from the world of science. Here is Professor Pervez Hoodbhoy, a distinguished professor of nuclear and high-energy physics at the University of Islamabad in Pakistan, writing about the frightening mentality which prevails in his country—one of the world's first states to define its very nationality by religion: In a public debate on the eve of the Pakistani nuclear tests, the former chief of the Pakistani army General Mirza Aslam Beg said: "We can make a first strike and a second and even a third." The prospect of nuclear war left him unmoved. "You can die crossing the street," he said, "or you could die in a nuclear war. You've got to die someday, anyway." . . . India and Pakistan are largely traditional societies, where the fundamental belief structure demands disempowerment and surrender to larger forces. A fatalistic Hindu belief that the stars above determine our destiny, or the equivalent Muslim belief in *Kismet* certainly account for part of the problem.

I shall not disagree with the very brave Professor Hoodbhoy, who helped alert us to the fact that there were several secret bin Laden supporters among the bureaucrats of the Pakistani nuclear program, and who also exposed the wild fanatics within that system who hoped to harness the power of the mythical *djinn*s, or desert devils, for military purposes. In his world, the enemies are mainly Muslims and Hindus. But within the "Judeo-Christian" world also, there are those who like to fantasize about a final conflict and embellish the vision with mushroom-shaped clouds. It is a tragic and potentially lethal irony that those who most despise science and the method of free inquiry should have been able to pilfer from it and annex its sophisticated products to their sick dreams.

The death wish, or something not unlike it, may be secretly present in all of us. At the turn of the year 1999 into 2000, many educated people talked and published infinite nonsense about a series of possible calamities and dramas. This was no better than primitive numerology: in fact it was slightly worse in that 2000 was only a number on Christian calendars and even the stoutest defenders of the Bible story now admit that if Jesus was ever born it wasn't until at least AD 4. The occasion was nothing more than an odometer for idiots, who sought the cheap thrill of impending doom. But religion makes such impulses legitimate, and claims the right to officiate at the end of life, just as it hopes to monopolize children at life's beginning. There can be no doubt that the cult of death and the insistence upon portents of the end proceed from a surreptitious desire to see it happen, and to put an end to the anxiety and doubt that always threaten the hold of faith. When the earthquake hits, or the tsunami inundates, or the twin towers ignite, you can see and hear the secret satisfaction of the faithful. Gleefully they strike up: "You see, this is what happens when you don't listen to us!" With an unctuous smile they offer a redemption that is not theirs to bestow and, when questioned, put on the menacing scowl that says, "Oh, so you reject our offer of paradise? Well, in that case we have quite another fate in store for you." Such love! Such care!

The element of the wish for obliteration can be seen without disguise in the millennial sects of our own day, who betray their selfishness as well as their nihilism by announcing how many will be "saved" from the ultimate catastrophe. Here the extreme Protestants are almost as much at fault as the most hysterical Muslims. In 1844, one of the greatest American religious "revivals" occurred, led by a semiliterate lunatic named George Miller. Mr. Miller managed to crowd the mountaintops of America with credulous fools who (having sold their belongings cheap) became persuaded that the world would end on October 22 that year. They removed themselves to high ground—what difference did they expect *that* to make?—or to the roofs of their hovels. When the ultimate failed to arrive, Miller's choice of terms was highly suggestive. It was, he announced, "The Great Disappointment." In our own time, Mr. Hal Lindsey, author of the best-selling *The Late Great Planet Earth*, has betrayed the same thirst for extinction. Indulged by senior American conservatives and respectfully interviewed on TV, Mr. Lindsey once dated the start of "The Tribulation"—a seven-year period of strife and terror—for 1988. This would have produced Armageddon itself (the closure of "The Tribulation") in 1995. Mr. Lindsey may be a charlatan, but it is a certainty that he and his followers suffer from a persistent feeling of anticlimax.

Antibodies to fatalism and suicide and masochism do exist, however, and are just as innate in our species. There is a celebrated story from Puritan Massachusetts in the late eighteenth century. During a session of the state legislature, the sky suddenly became leaden and overcast at midday. Its

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threatening aspect—a darkness at noon— convinced many legislators that the event so much on their clouded minds was imminent. They asked to suspend business and go home to die. The speaker of the assembly, Abraham Davenport, managed to keep his nerve and dignity. "Gentlemen," he said, "either the Day of Judgment is here or it is not. If it is not, there is no occasion for alarm and lamentation. If it is, however, I wish to be found doing my duty. I move, therefore, that candles be brought." In his own limited and superstitious day, this was the best that Mr. Davenport could do. Nonetheless, I second his motion.

## Chapter Five

### The Metaphysical Claims of Religion Are False

I am a man of one book.

—THOMAS AQUINAS

We sacrifice the intellect to God.

—IGNATIUS LOYOLA

Reason is the Devil's harlot, who can do nought but slander and harm whatever God says and does.

—MARTIN LUTHER

Looking up at the stars, I know quite well

That for all they care, I can go to hell.

—W. H. AUDEN, "THE MORE LOVING ONE"

I wrote earlier that we would never again have to confront the impressive faith of an Aquinas or a Maimonides (as contrasted with the blind faith of millennial or absolutist sects, of which we have an apparently unlimited and infinitely renewable supply). This is for a simple reason. Faith of that sort—the sort that can stand up at least for a while in a confrontation with reason—is now plainly impossible. The early fathers of faith (they made very sure that there would be no mothers) were living in a time of abysmal ignorance and fear. Maimonides did not include, in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, those whom he described as not worth the effort: the "Turkish" and black and nomadic peoples whose "nature is like the nature of mute animals." Aquinas half believed in astrology, and was convinced that the fully formed nucleus (not that he would have known the word as we do) of a human being was contained inside each individual sperm. One can only mourn over the dismal and stupid lectures on sexual continence that we might have been spared if this nonsense had been exposed earlier than it was. Augustine was a self-centered fantasist and an earth-centered ignoramus: he was guiltily convinced that God cared about his trivial theft from some unimportant pear trees, and quite persuaded—by an analogous solipsism—that the sun revolved around the earth. He also fabricated the mad and cruel idea that the souls of un-baptized children were sent to "limbo." Who can guess the load of misery that this diseased "theory" has placed on millions of Catholic parents down the years, until its shamefaced and only partial revision by the church in our own time? Luther was terrified of demons and believed that the mentally afflicted were the devil's work. Muhammad is claimed by his own followers to have thought, as did Jesus, that the desert was pullulating with *djinn*s, or evil spirits. One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody—not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms—had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs). Today the least educated of my children knows much more about the natural order than any of the founders of religion, and one would like to think—though the connection is not a fully

demonstrable one—that this is why they seem so uninterested in sending fellow humans to hell.

All attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule for precisely these reasons. I read, for example, of some ecumenical conference of Christians who desire to show their broad-mindedness and invite some physicists along. But I am compelled to remember what I know—which is that there would be no such churches in the first place if humanity had not been afraid of the weather, the dark, the plague, the eclipse, and all manner of other things now easily explicable. And also if humanity had not been compelled, on pain of extremely agonizing consequences, to pay the exorbitant tithes and taxes that raised the imposing edifices of religion.

It is true that scientists have sometimes been religious, or at any rate superstitious. Sir Isaac Newton, for example, was a spiritualist and alchemist of a particularly laughable kind. Fred Hoyle, an ex-agnostic who became infatuated with the idea of "design," was the Cambridge astronomer who coined the term "big bang." (He came up with that silly phrase, incidentally, as an attempt to discredit what is now the accepted theory of the origins of the universe. This was one of those lampoons that, so to speak, backfired, since like "Tory" and "impressionist" and "suffragette" it became adopted by those at whom it was directed.) Steven Hawking is not a believer, and when invited to Rome to meet the late Pope John Paul II asked to be shown the records of the trial of Galileo. But he does speak without embarrassment of the chance of physics "knowing the mind of God," and this now seems quite harmless as a metaphor, as for example when the Beach Boys sing, or I say, "God only knows . . ."

Before Charles Darwin revolutionized our entire concept of our origins, and Albert Einstein did the same for the beginnings of our cosmos, many scientists and philosophers and mathematicians took what might be called the default position and professed one or another version of "deism," which held that the order and predictability of the universe seemed indeed to imply a designer, if not necessarily a designer who took any active part in human affairs. This compromise was a logical and rational one for its time, and was especially influential among the Philadelphia and Virginia intellectuals, such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, who managed to seize a moment of crisis and use it to enshrine Enlightenment values in the founding documents of the United States of America.

Yet as Saint Paul so unforgettably said, when one is a child one speaks and thinks as a child. But when one becomes a man, one puts away childish things. It is not quite possible to locate the exact moment when men of learning stopped spinning the coin as between a creator and a long complex process, or ceased trying to split the "deistic" difference, but humanity began to grow up a little in the closing decades of the eighteenth century and the opening decades of the nineteenth. (Charles Darwin was born in 1809, on

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