

the
**Portable
Atheist**

**ESSENTIAL READINGS
FOR THE NONBELIEVER**

selected and with introductions by

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS



DA CAPO PRESS

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Dedicated to the memory of Primo Levi (1919-1987) who had the moral fortitude to refuse false consolation even while enduring the “selection” process in Auschwitz:

“Silence slowly prevails and then, from my bunk on the top row, I see and hear old Kuhn praying aloud, with his beret on his head, swaying backwards and forwards violently. Kuhn is thanking God because he has not been chosen.

Kuhn is out of his senses. Does he not see Beppo the Greek in the bunk next to him, Beppo who is twenty years old and is going to the gas-chamber the day after tomorrow and knows it and lies there looking fixedly at the light without saying anything and without even thinking anymore? Can Kuhn fail to realize that next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not understand that what has happened today is an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again?

If I was God, I would spit at Kuhn’s prayer.”

—FROM PRIMO LEVI: *IF THIS IS A MAN* (1959)

“I too entered the Lager as a nonbeliever, and as a nonbeliever I was liberated and have lived to this day. Actually, the experience of the Lager with its frightful iniquity confirmed me in my nonbelief. It has prevented me, and still prevents me, from conceiving of any form of providence or transcendent justice . . . I must nevertheless admit that I experienced (and again only once) the temptation to yield to seek refuge in prayer. This happened in October 1944, in the one moment in which I lucidly perceived the imminence of death . . . naked and compressed among my naked companions with my personal index card in hand, I was waiting to file past the ‘commission’ that with one glance would decide whether I should go immediately into the gas chamber or was instead strong enough to go on working. For one instance I felt the need to ask for help and asylum; then, despite my anguish, equanimity prevailed: one does not change the rules of the game at the end of the match, nor when you are losing. A prayer under these conditions would have been not only absurd (what rights could I claim? and from whom?) but blasphemous, obscene, laden with the greatest impiety of which a nonbeliever is capable. I rejected the temptation: I knew that otherwise were I to survive, I would have to be ashamed of it.”

—FROM PRIMO LEVI: *THE DROWNED AND THE SAVED* (1986)

Acknowledgments

My warmest thanks are due to my agent, Steve Wasserman, and my publisher and editor, Ben Schafetz, for the collaboration which initiated this volume. It's safe to say that without the devoted skill of Lori Hobkirk as copy editor and project editor and Cliff Corcoran as copyright and permissions editor, the scope and range of the collection would have been considerably less than it is.

When accused—probably correctly—of scientific plagiarism, Sir Isaac Newton was careful to say (again plagiarizing from an ancient acknowledgement) that he had “stood on the shoulders of giants.” I am, in this effort as in all my other ones, immensely indebted to a small but growing group of devoted rationalists, who reject the absurd and wicked claims of the religious and who look for answers in the marvels and complexities of science, as well as in the higher and deeper reaches of literature. I am more proud than I can say that Salman Rushdie, Ian McEwan, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali have contributed some hitherto unpublished work to this anthology. In the realm of the natural and physical sciences, the labors of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Michael Shermer, Steven Weinberg, Anthony Grayling, and Sam Harris have been at once courageous, witty, and original, and it is my dearest hope that anybody picking up this book of excerpts will be impelled to read all the work of these distinguished authors at their full length and full strength.

—*Christopher Hitchens*

Introduction

Christopher Hitchens

At the close of his imperishable novel *La Peste* (“The Plague”), Albert Camus gives us a picture of the thoughts of the good Dr. Rieux, as the town of Oran celebrates its recovery from—its survival of—a terrible visitation of disease. Rieux determines to remain lucid and to “complete this chronicle,” in order that:

He should not be one of those who held their peace but should bear witness in favor of those plagues-stricken people; so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and state quite simply what we learn in a time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.

This is part of the work, both of conscience and of memory. The pre-history of our species is harrowed with episodes of nightmarish ignorance and calamity, for which religion used to identify, not just the wrong explanation but the wrong culprit. Human sacrifices were made preeminently in times of epidemics, useless prayers were uttered, bogus “miracles” attested to, and scapegoats—such as Jews or heretics or witches—hunted down and burned. The few men of science and reason and medicine had all they could do to keep their libraries and laboratories intact, or their very lives safe from harm. Of course, when the evil had “passed over,” there were equally idiotic ceremonies of hysterical thanksgiving, propitiating whatever local deities there might be . . .

And indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city.

One is continually told, as an unbeliever, that it is old-fashioned to rail against the primitive stupidities and cruelties of religion because after all, in these enlightened times, the old superstitions have died away. Nine times out of ten, in debate with a cleric, one will be told not of some dogma or religious certitude but of some instance of charitable or humanitarian work undertaken by a religious person. Of course, this says nothing about the belief system involved: it may be true that Lou Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam succeeds in weaning young black men off narcotics, but this would not alter the fact that the NoI is a racist crackpot organization. And has not Hamas—which publishes *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* on its Web site—won a reputation for its provision of social services? My own response has been to issue a challenge: name me an ethical statement made or an action performed by a believer that could not have been made or performed by a non-believer. As yet I have had no takers. (Whereas, oddly enough, if you ask an audience to name a wicked statement

action directly attributable to religious faith, nobody has any difficulty in finding an example.)

No, the fact is that the bacilli are always lurking in the old texts and are latent in the theory and practice of religion. This anthology hopes to identify and isolate the bacilli more precisely, and also to vindicate Dr. Rieux by giving prominence to those who, then and now, have always counterposed enlightenment to the bane:

The record of what had had to be done, and what assuredly would have to be done again in the never-ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts, despite their personal afflictions, by all who while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences, strive their utmost to be healers.

I am writing these words on July 4, 2007, the anniversary of the proclamation of the world's first secular republic. The men who wrote the Declaration were men of an Enlightenment temper, who quite understood that religion could be (in the words of William Blake) a "mind-forg'd manacle." As I scan the newspapers, I cannot help but notice that in one happy city—London—the rats have come vomiting from the sewers again. Car bombs have been planted outside nightclubs, in the hope of maiming and dismembering young women who have the nerve to be immodest in public. Blood-curdling yells, thirsty for the murder of Jews, Indians, and other riff-raff, issue from mosques and from tapes and films sold in their precincts. In one of the most secular and multicultural capitals of human history, the lives of everyone are being poisoned by hatred and violence. It then became clear that most of the principals in the bomb-plot were physicians, as if a special code of horror had just been disencrypted. The shock of this was considerable: men who took the Hippocratic oath were secretly committed to murder. Such naiveté. Dr. Rieux would have understood, as would Camus himself. "Medical men" have always been in attendance at torture sessions and executions, brought there by the clerics to lend extra tone and authority to the scene. The worst offenders in the Final Solution were doctors who saw a chance to conduct vile experiments. None was ever threatened by the Church with excommunication (they would have had to assist at a termination of an unwanted pregnancy in order to run such an awful risk). And today, those who award themselves permission to destroy the lives of others need only say that they have divine permission in order to read excuses for their actions from clerical authorities—excuses and euphemisms that are often published in respectable newspapers. An especially revolting example was provided by the murderous Dr. Baruch Goldstein and his apologists.

As it happened, on the same weekend as the discovery of the London and Glasgow bomb plot there came some devastating floods to the north of England, leaving thousands of people homeless. The Church of England was not slow to rush to the aid of the stricken. "This is a strong and definitive judgment," announced the Bishop of Carlisle, "because the world has been arrogant in going its own way. We are reaping the consequences of our moral degradation." From a list of possible transgressions the Bishop (who has sources of information denied to the rest of us) selected recent legal moves to allow more rights to homosexuals. These, he said, placed us "in a situation where we are liable for God's judgment, which is intended to call us to repentance." Many of his senior colleagues, including one who has been spoken of as a future Archbishop of Canterbury, joined him in blaming the floods—which had only hit one geographical section of the country—on sexual preference. I have chosen this example because most people would agree that the Anglican/Episcopalian "communion" is among the most moderate and humane of modern religious institutions.

Yet who said this, and when, and while speaking of the likelihood of a nuclear holocaust? "The ver-

worst it could do would be to sweep a vast number of people at one moment from this world into the other and more vital world, into which anyhow they must pass at one time." That was not Rafsanjani or Ahmadinejad, both of whom have gloatingly said that Islam could survive a nuclear exchange which the Jewish state could not. It was the mild, sheep-faced Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher, who spoke not very many years ago. And, in a sense, and while we may laugh or jeer at the old fool, Fisher would have been untrue to his faith if he had said otherwise. To admit that a thermonuclear catastrophe would be the end of civilization and of the biosphere would be, in religious terms, profane and defeatist. All religions must, at their core, *look forward* to the end of this world and to the longed-for moment when all will be revealed and when the sheep will be divided from the goats, or whatever other bucolic Bronze-Age desert analogy might seem apt. (In Papua New Guinea, where as in most tropical climes there are no sheep, the Christians use the most valued animal of the locals and refer to the congregation as "swine." Flock, herd: what difference does it make?)

Against this insane eschatology, with its death wish and its deep contempt for the life of the minute, atheists have always argued that this world is all that we have, and that our duty is to one another: to make the very most and best of it. Theism cannot coexist with this unexceptionable conclusion. If you stay with animal analogies for a moment, owners of dogs will have noticed that, if you provide them with food and water and shelter and affection, they will think you are god. Whereas owners of cats are compelled to realize that, if you provide them with food and water and shelter and affection, they draw the conclusion that *they* are god. (Cats may sometimes share the cold entrails of a kill with you, but this is just what a god might do if he was in a good mood.) Religion, then, partakes of equal elements of the canine and the feline. It exacts maximum servility and abjection, requiring you to regard yourself as conceived and born in sin and owing a duty to a stern creator. But in return, it places you at the center of the universe and assures you that you are the personal object of a heavenly plan. Indeed, if you make the right propitiations you may even find that death has no sting, and that an exception to the rules of physical annihilation may be made in your own case. It cannot be said often enough that this preachment is immoral as well as irrational.

To be charitable, one may admit that the religious often seem unaware of how insulting their main proposition actually is. Exchange views with a believer even for a short time, and let us make the assumption that this is a mild and decent believer who does not open the bidding by telling you that your unbelief will endanger your soul and condemn you to hell. It will not be long until you are politely asked how you can possibly know right from wrong. Without holy awe, what is to prevent you from resorting to theft, murder, rape, and perjury? It will sometimes be conceded that non-believers have led ethical lives, and it will also be conceded (as it had better be) that many believers have been responsible for terrible crimes. Nonetheless, the working assumption is that we should have no more compassion if we were not somehow in thrall to an unalterable and unchallengeable celestial dictatorship. What a repulsive idea! As well as taking the axe to the root of everything that we have learned about evolutionary biology (societies that tolerate murder and theft and perjury will not last long, and those that violate the taboos on incest and cannibalism do in fact simply die out), it constitutes a radical attack on the very concept of human self-respect. It does so by suggesting that one could not do a right action or avoid a wrong one, except for the hope of a divine reward or the fear of divine retribution. Many of us, even the less unselfish, might hope to do better than that on our own. When I give blood, for example (something that several religions forbid), I do not lose a pint, but someone else gains one. There is something about this that appeals to me, and I derive other satisfactions as well from being of assistance to a fellow creature. Furthermore, I have a very rare blood type and I hope very much that

when I am in need of a transfusion someone else will have thought and acted in precisely the same way that I have. Indeed, I can almost count on it. Nobody had to teach me any of this, let alone reinforce the teaching with sinister fairy-tales about appearances by the Archangel Gabriel. The so-called Golden Rule is innate in us, or is innate except in the sociopaths who do not care about other people and the psychopaths who take pleasure from cruelty. Evolution has not more weeded these out than it has succeeded in reducing the percentage of good people who are naturally homosexual. Religion invents a problem where none exists by describing the wicked as also made in the image of god and the sexually nonconformist as existing in a state of incurable mortal sin that can incidentally cause floods and earthquakes.

How did such evil nonsense ever come to be so influential? And why are we so continually locked in combat with its violent and intolerant votaries? Well, religion was the race's first (and worst) attempt to make sense of reality. It was the best the species could do at a time when we had no concepts of physics, chemistry, biology or medicine. We did not know that we lived on a round planet, let alone that the said planet was in orbit in a minor and obscure solar system, which was also on the edge of an unimaginably vast cosmos that was exploding away from its original source of energy. We did not know that micro-organisms were so powerful and lived in our digestive systems in order to enable us to live, as well as mounting lethal attacks on us as parasites. We did not know of our close kinship with other animals. We believed that sprites, imps, demons, and djinns were hovering in the air about us. We imagined that thunder and lightning were portentous. It has taken us a long time to shrug off this heavy coat of ignorance and fear, and every time we do there are self-interested forces who want to compel us to put it back on again.

By all means let us agree that we are pattern-seeking mammals and that, owing to our restless intelligence and inquisitiveness, we will still prefer a conspiracy theory to no explanation at all. Religion was our first attempt at philosophy, just as alchemy was our first attempt at chemistry and astrology our first attempt to make sense of the movements of the heavens. I myself am a strong believer in the study of religion, first because culture and education involve a respect for tradition and for origins, and also because some of the early religious texts were among our first attempts at literature. But there is a reason why religions insist so much on strange events in the sky, as well as on less quantifiable phenomena such as dreams and visions. All of these things cater to our inborn stupidity, and our willingness to be persuaded against all the evidence that we are indeed the center of the universe and that everything is arranged with us in mind.

This pathetic solipsism can be noticed in all the arguments offered—with increasing desperation—against the interpretations of Darwin and Einstein. We now have better and simpler explanations of the origins of the species, and of the cosmos. (“Simpler” only because these explanations are more testable and consistent, not because they are not *very* much more complex.) But wait, pleads the believer. Let me grant you—finally!—the record of natural selection and the Hubble evidence for the big bang. Does this not show that the maker of all things was even more ingenious than we had thought? With the assistance of others who will be cited at proper length later in this book, let me try to put this poor argument out of its misery. Let us grant the assumption of the religious. Some one or some thing was indeed “present at the creation,” and gave the order to let matter explode and then let the evolutionary process begin on this planet. Never mind that this assumption could never conceivably be proved. Make the assumption, anyway. After all, it cannot be decisively disproved either, any more than any other random unsupported assumption.

The godly person still has all his work ahead of him. On what authority can he hope to show that the original flying-apart of matter was set in motion with the object of influencing life on a minute speck of a planet, billions of years later, at the very margins of the whirling nebulae and amid the extinction of innumerable other worlds? How is it to be demonstrated that the planner of this inconceivably vast enterprise had in mind the cretinous figure of the Bishop of Carlisle, wielding his shepherd's crook while connecting the sex-life of his parishioners to the weather?

Or again, and coming down in point of scale by several titanic orders of magnitude, and given that at least 98 percent of all species on this tiny speck of a planet made only a few hesitant steps "forward" before succumbing to extinction, on what warrant is it proposed that all this massive dying out and occasional vast life-explosion (as in the Cambrian period) also had as its sole object the presence of ourselves? And isn't it odd that religion, which continually enjoins an almost masochistic modesty upon us in the face of god, should encourage such an extreme and impossible form of self-centeredness and self-regard? By trying to adjust to the findings that it once tried so viciously to banish and repress, religion has only succeeded in restating the same questions that undermined it in earlier epochs. What kind of designer or creator is so wasteful and capricious and approximate? What kind of designer or creator is so cruel and indifferent? And—most of all—what kind of designer or creator only chooses to "reveal" himself to semi-stupefied peasants in desert regions? I have met some highly intelligent believers, but history has no record of any human being who was remotely qualified to say that he knew or understood the mind of god. Yet this is precisely the qualification which the god must claim—so modestly and so humbly—to possess. It is time to withdraw our "respect" from such fantastic claims, all of them aimed at the exertion of power over other humans in the real and material world.

There is no moral or intellectual equivalent between the different degrees of uncertainty here. The atheist generally says (though the bold Dr. Victor Stenger goes a bit further) that the existence of a deity cannot be *dis*-proved. It can only be found to be entirely lacking in evidence or proof. The theist can opt to be a mere deist, and to say that the magnificence of the natural order strongly implies an ordering force. (This was the view taken, at least in public, by opponents of religion such as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine.) But the religious person *must* go further and say that this creative force is also an intervening one: one that cares for our human affairs and is interested in what we eat and with whom we have sexual relations, as well as in the outcomes of battles and wars. To assert this is quite simply to assert more than any human can possibly claim to know, and thus it falls, and should be discarded, and should have been discarded long ago.

Some things can be believed and some things simply cannot. I *might* choose to believe that Jesus Nazareth was born of a virgin in Bethlehem, and that later he both did and did not die, since he was seen again by humans after the time of his apparent decease. Many have argued that the sheer unlikelihood of this story makes it fractionally more probable. Again, then, suppose that I grant the virgin birth and the resurrection. The religious still have all of their work ahead of them. These events, even if confirmed, would not prove that Jesus was the son of god. Nor would they prove the truth or morality of his teachings. Nor would they prove that there was an afterlife or a last judgment. His miracles, if verified, would likewise leave him one among many shamans and magicians, some of them mentioned in the Old Testament, who could apparently work wonders by sorcery. Many of the philosophers and logicians cited in this book take the view that miracles cannot and did not occur, and Albert Einstein took the view (which some stubbornly consider to be a deist one) that the miracle was that there *are* no miracles or other interruptions of a wondrous natural order. This is not a difference

that can be split: either faith is sufficient or else miracles are required to reassure those—including the preachers—whose faith would otherwise not be strong enough. For me, witnessing an act of faith healing or conjury would simply not be persuasive, even if I could credit it and even if I did not know people who could—and can and do—replicate such wonders on stage.

But here is something that is *impossible* for anyone to believe. The human species has been in existence as *Homo sapiens* for (let us not quarrel about the exact total) at least one hundred and fifty thousand years. An instant in evolutionary time, this is nonetheless a vast history when contemplated by primates with brains and imaginations of the dimensions that we can boast. In order to subscribe to monotheistic religion, one must believe that humans were born, struggled, and expired during this time, often dying in childbirth or for want of elementary nurture, and with a life-expectancy of perhaps three decades at most. Add to these factors the turf wars between discrepant groups and tribes, alarming outbreaks of disease, which had no germ theory to explain let alone palliate them, and associated natural disasters and human tragedies. And yet, for all these millennia, heaven watched with indifference and then—and only in the last six thousand years at the very least—decided that it was time to intervene as well as redeem. And heaven would only intervene and redeem in remote areas of the Middle East, thus ensuring that many more generations would expire before the news could begin to spread! Let me send a voice to Sinai and cement a pact with just one tribe of dogged and greedy yokels. Let me lend a son to be torn to pieces because he is misunderstood. . . . Let me tell the angel Gabriel to prompt an illiterate and uncultured merchant into rhetorical flights. At last the darkness that I have imposed will lift! The willingness even to entertain such elaborately mad ideas involves much more than the suspension of disbelief, or the dumb credulity that greets magic tricks.

It also involves ignoring or explaining away the many religious beliefs that antedated Moses. Our primeval ancestors were by no means atheistic: they raised temples and altars and offered the requisite terrified obsequies and sacrifices. Their religion was man-made, like all the others. There was a time when Greek thinkers denounced Christians and Zoroastrians denounced Muslims as “atheists” for their destruction of old sites and their prohibition of ancient rituals. The source of desecration and profanity is religious, as we can see from the way that today’s believers violate the sanctity of each other’s temples, from Bamiyan to Belfast to Baghdad. Richard Dawkins may have phrased it more pungently when he argued that everybody is an atheist in saying that there is a god—from Ra to Shiva—in which he does *not* believe. All that the serious and objective atheist does is to take the next step and to say that there is just one more god to disbelieve in. Human solipsism can generally be counted upon to become enraged and to maintain that this discountable god must not be the one in which the believer himself has invested so much credence. So it goes. But the man-made character of religion from which monotheism swore to deliver us at least in its pagan form, persists in a terrifying shape in our own time, as believers fight each other over the correct interpretation and even kill members of their own faiths in battles over doctrine. Civilization has been immensely retarded by such arcane interfaith quarrels and could now be destroyed by their modern versions.

There is an argument within the community of those who reject all this fantasy about the utility of the word “atheist.” For one thing, it is a pure negative: a statement of mere unbelief or disbelief. David Jonathan Miller, for example, a distinguished physician and theater and opera director, is uneasy with the term for this reason: “I do not have,” he once told me, “a special word for saying that I do not believe in the tooth fairy or in Santa Claus. I *presume* that my intelligent friends do not suppose that I believe such things.” True enough—but we do not have to emerge from a past when tooth fairies and Father Christmas (both rather recent inventions) held sway. The fans of the tooth fairy do not bang o

your door and try to convert you. They do not insist that their pseudo-science be taught in schools. ~~They do not condemn believers in rival tooth fairies to death and damnation. They do not say that a morality comes from tooth fairy ceremonies, and that without the tooth fairy there would be fornication in the streets and the abolition of private property. They do not say that the tooth fairy made the world, and that all of us must therefore bow the knee to the Big Brother tooth fairy. They do not say that the tooth fairy will order you to kill your sister if she is seen in public with a man who is not her brother.~~

Thus it seems to me that there is what the poet Shelley once called the *necessity* of atheism. One cannot avoid taking a position. Either one attributes one's presence here to the laws of biology and physics, or one attributes it to a divine design. (You can tell a lot about friend or foe, depending on how he or she answers this inescapable question, and on how he or she faces its implications.) Yet just like the believer, once we have made up our minds, we still have the bulk of our work lying ahead of us.

The rejection of the man-made concept of god is not a sufficient condition for intellectual or moral emancipation. Atheists have no right to go around looking superior. They have only fulfilled the *necessary* condition by throwing off the infancy of the species and disclaiming a special place in the natural scheme. They are now free, if they so choose, to become nihilists or sadists or solipsists on their own account. Some theories of the Superman derive from atheism, and a person who thought that heaven and hell were empty could conclude that he was free to do exactly as he wished. The fear that this might be the outcome—well-expressed by Fyodor Dostoyevsky—underlies many people's reluctance to abandon religious dogma. Yet many sadists and mass-murderers also claim to be hearing heavenly "voices" ordering them to commit their crimes, which would not in itself discredit religious faith. The argument about ethics and morality will have to go on in a post-religious society, just as it had to go on when religion was regnant and was often ordering good people to agree to evil things, such as torture, slavery, or cruelty to children. The fact seems to be that there is a natural human revulsion from such things, whatever the super-ambient political or religious context may be.

There is also (and here I make a slightly different stress than does Dawkins) no special reason to credit "science" as the father or godfather of reason. As in the case of the doctors mentioned earlier, commitment to experiment and find evidence is no guarantee of immunity to superstition and worse. Sir Isaac Newton was prey to the most idiotic opinions about alchemy. Joseph Priestley, the courageous Unitarian and skeptic who discovered oxygen, was a believer in the phlogiston theory. Alfred Russel Wallace, one of Darwin's greatest collaborators and progenitors, was a dedicated attendee of spiritualist sessions where "ectoplasm" was produced by frauds to the applause of morons. Even today, there are important men of science—admittedly a minority—who maintain that their findings are compatible with belief in a creator. They may not be able to derive the one from the other, or even to claim to do so, but they testify to the extreme stubbornness with which intelligent people will cling to unsupported opinions.

However, the original form of tyranny of man over man, and of man over the mind of man (sometimes called totalitarianism) was certainly theocratic, and no overcoming of the absolutist or the arbitrary is complete unless it includes a clear-eyed rejection of any dictator whose rule is founded on the supernatural. I myself have tried to formulate a position I call "anti-theist." There are, after all, atheists who say that they wish the fable were true but are unable to suspend the requisite disbelief, and have relinquished belief only with regret. To this I reply: who wishes that there was a permanent

unalterable celestial despotism that subjected us to continual surveillance and could convict us thought-crime, and who regarded us as its private property even after we died? How happy we ought be, at the reflection that there exists not a shred of respectable evidence to support such a horrible hypothesis. And how grateful we should be to those of our predecessors who repudiated this utter negation of human freedom. There were many people long before Darwin or Einstein or even Galileo who saw through the claims of the rabbis and priests and imams. In earlier times, such repudiations often involved extraordinary courage. The ensuing pages will, I hope, introduce you to some of those who manifested this quality. Acquaintance with such minds will also, I think, help dissolve another objection to atheism.

It is sometimes argued that disbelief in a fearful and tempting heavenly despotism makes life in something arid and tedious and cynical: a mere existence without any consolation or any awareness of the numinous or the transcendent. What nonsense this is. In the first place, it commits an obvious error. It seems to say that we ought not to believe that we are an evolved animal species with faulty components and a short lifespan for ourselves and our globe, lest the consequences of the belief be unwelcome or discreditable to us. Could anything show more clearly the bad effects of wish-thinking? There can be no serious ethical position based on denial or a refusal to look the facts squarely in the face. But this does not mean that we must stare into the abyss all the time. (Only religion, oddly enough, has ever required that we obsessively do that.)

Believing then—as this religious objection implicitly concedes—that human life is actually worth living, one can combat one's natural pessimism by stoicism and the refusal of illusion, without embellishing the scene with any one of the following. There are the beauties of science and the extraordinary marvels of nature. There is the consolation and irony of philosophy. There are the infinite splendors of literature and poetry, not excluding the liturgical and devotional aspects of these, such as those found in John Donne or George Herbert. There is the grand resource of art and music and architecture, again not excluding those elements that aspire to the sublime. In all of these pursuits, and in one of them enough to absorb a lifetime, there may be found a sense of awe and magnificence that does not depend at all on any invocation of the supernatural. Indeed, nobody armed by art and culture and literature and philosophy is likely to be anything but bored and sickened by ghost stories, UFO tales, spiritualist experiences, or babblings from the beyond. One can appreciate and treasure the symmetry and grandeur of the ancient Greek Parthenon, for example, without needing any share in the cults of Athena or Eleusis, or the imperatives of Athenian imperialism, just as one may listen to Mozart or admire Chartres and Durham without any nostalgia for feudalism, monarchism, and the sale of indulgences. The whole concept of culture, indeed, may partly consist in discriminating between these things. Religion asks us to do the opposite and to preserve the ancient dreads and prohibitions even as we dwell amid modern architecture and modern weapons.

It is very often argued that religion must have some sort of potency and relevance, since it occurs so strongly at all times and in all places. None of the authors collected here would ever have denied that. Some of them would argue that religion is so much a part of our human or animal nature that it is actually ineradicable. This, for what it may be worth, is my own view. We are unlikely to cease making gods or inventing ceremonies to please them for as long as we are afraid of death, or of the dark, and for as long as we persist in self-centeredness. That could be a lengthy stretch of time. However, it is just as certain that we shall continue to cast a skeptical and ironic and even witty eye on what we have ourselves invented. If religion is innate in us, then so is our doubt of it and our contempt for our own weakness.

Some of the authors and writers and thinkers assembled in these pages are famous for other reasons than their intelligence and their moral courage on this point. Several of them are chiefly celebrated because they took on the most inflated reputation of all: the elevation into a godhead of all mankind distilled fears and hatreds and stupidities. Some of them have had the experience of faith and the experience of losing it, while others were and are, in the words of Blaise Pascal, so made that they cannot believe.

Arguments for atheism can be divided into two main categories: those that dispute the existence of god and those that demonstrate the ill effects of religion. It might be better if I broadened the term somewhat, and said those that dispute the existence of an *intervening* god. Religion is, after all, more than the belief in a supreme being. It is the cult of that supreme being and the belief that his or her wishes have been made known or can be determined. Defining matters in this way, I can allow myself to mention great critics such as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, who perhaps paradoxically regarded religion as an insult to god. And sooner or later, one must take a position on agnosticism. This word has not been with us for very long—it was coined by the great Thomas Huxley, one of Darwin's stalwart defenders in the original argument over natural selection. It is sometimes used as a half-way house by those who cannot make a profession of faith but are unwilling to repudiate either religion or god absolutely. Since, once again, I am defining as religious those who claim to know, I feel I can lay claim to some at least of those who do *not* claim to know. An agnostic does not believe in god, or disbelieve in him. Non-belief is not quite unbelief, but I shall press it into service and name as many agnostics as I can for this collection.

Authors as diverse as Matthew Arnold and George Orwell have given thought to the serious question: what is to be done about morals and ethics now that religion has so much decayed? Arnold went almost as far as to propose that the study of literature replace the study of religion. I must say that I slightly dread the effect that this might have had on literary pursuit, but as a source of ethical reflection and as a mirror in which to see our human dilemmas reflected, the literary tradition is infinitely superior to the childish parables and morality tales, let alone the sanguinary and sectarian admonitions, of the “holy” books. So I have included what many serious novelists and poets have had to say on this most freighted of all subjects. And who, really, will turn away from George Eliot and James Joyce and Joseph Conrad in order to rescrutinize the bare and narrow and constipated and fearful world of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Osama bin Laden?

It is often unconsciously assumed that religious faith is somehow conservative and that atheism “freethinking” are a part of the liberal tradition. This is for good and sufficient historical reasons having to do with the origins of the American and French revolutions. However, many honorable and intelligent conservatives have rejected “faith” on several grounds. These grounds may include sheer implausibility, or the apparent privilege given by religion to one of its main constituencies—that of the losers, the diseased, the inert, the mendicants, and the helpless. To many an upright poor person, it seems needless to invent a god who will wash the feet of beggars and exalt those who do not care for labor. What is this but a denial of thrift and a sickly obsession with the victim? The so-called common people are quite able to penetrate this ruse (“The good lord must indeed love the poor, since he makes so many of them”). Many decent people are made uneasy by the constant injunction to give alms and to dwell among those who have lost their self-respect. They can also see the hook sticking out of the bait: abandon this useless life, leave your family, and follow the prophet who says that the world is soon to pass away. Such an injunction coupled with an implicit or explicit “or else” is repulsive to many conservatives who believe in self-reliance and personal integrity, and who distrust “charity

just as it was repulsive to the early socialists who did not think that poverty was an ideal or romantic or ennobled state.

Finally, I want to come to the question of sex. If anything proves that religion is not just man-made but masculine-made, it is the incessant repetition of rules and taboos governing the sexual life. The disease is pervasive, from the weird obsession with virginity and the one-way birth canal through which prophets are “delivered,” through the horror of menstrual blood, all the way to the fascinated disgust with homosexuality and the pretended concern with children (who suffer worse at the hands of the faithful than any other group). Male and female genital mutilation; the terrifying of infants with hideous fictions about guilt and hell; the wild prohibition of masturbation: religion will never be able to live down the shame with which it has stained itself for generations in this regard, anymore than it can purge its own guilt for the ruining of formative periods of precious life.

A saving grace of the human condition (if I may phrase it like that) is a sense of humor. Many writers and witnesses, guessing the connection between sexual repression and religious fervor, have managed to rescue themselves and others from its deadly grip by the exercise of wit. And much of religion is so laughable on its face that writers from Voltaire to Bertrand Russell to Chapman Cohen have had great fun at its expense. In our own day, the humor of scientists such as Richard Dawkins and Carl Sagan has ridiculed the apparent inability of the creator to know, let alone to understand, what he has created. Gods seem not to know of any animals except the ones tended by their immediate worshippers and seem to be ignorant as well of microbes and the laws of physics. The self-evident man-madness of religion, as well as its masculine-madness in respect of religion’s universal commitment to male domination, is one of the first things to strike the eye.

A terrible thing has now happened to religion. Except in the places where it can still enforce itself by fear superimposed on ignorance, it has become one opinion among many. It is forced to compete in the free market of ideas and, even when it strives to retain the old advantage of inculcating its teachings into children (for reasons that are too obvious to need underlining), it has to stand up to open debate and submit to free inquiry. In the summer of 2007, I was sitting in a studio in Dublin debating with a lay spokesman of the Roman Catholic Church who turned out to be the only believing Christian on a discussion panel of five people. He was a perfectly nice and rather modest logic-chopping polemicist, happy enough to go for a glass of refreshment after the program, and I suddenly felt a piercing stab of pity for him. A generation ago in Ireland, the Church did not have to lower itself in this way. It raised its voice only slightly, and was instantly obeyed by the Parliament, the schools, and the media. It could and did forbid divorce, contraception, the publication of certain books, and the utterance of certain opinions. Now it is discredited and in decline. Its once-absolute doctrines appear ridiculous: only a few weeks before this radio show the Vatican had finally admitted that “Limbo” (traditional destination for the souls of unbaptised children) did not exist after all. There are also local reasons for the decline, the reverberations of the child-rape scandal being prominent among them, but the secularization of Ireland is a part of a wider enlightenment in which well-grounded unbelief has become a genuinely strong and rooted presence. The availability and accessibility of well-produced books, cassettes, and DVDs, emphasizing the triumphs of science and reason, is a large part of the success. And so, of course, is the increasingly clear realization, on the part of civilized people, that the main enemy we face is “faith-based.”

Open the newspaper or turn on the television and see what the parties of god are doing to Iraq, their attempt to reduce a once-advanced society to the level of Afghanistan or Somalia (the last two

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