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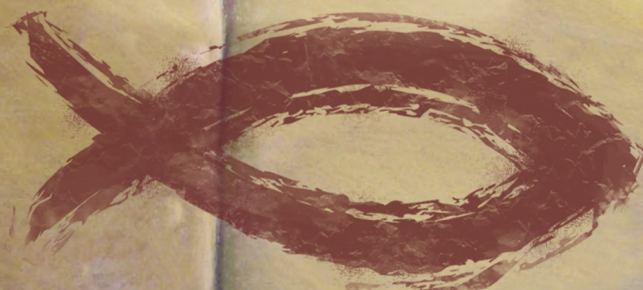
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Celebrating Reason and Humanity April/May 2007 Vol. 27 No. 3

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Gerd Lüdemann



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THE AFFIRMATIONS OF HUMANISM: A STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES*



We are committed to the application of reason and science to the understanding of the universe and to the solving of human problems.

We deplore efforts to denigrate human intelligence, to seek to explain the world in supernatural terms, and to look outside nature for salvation.

We believe that scientific discovery and technology can contribute to the betterment of human life.

We believe in an open and pluralistic society and that democracy is the best guarantee of protecting human rights from authoritarian elites and repressive majorities.

We are committed to the principle of the separation of church and state.

We cultivate the arts of negotiation and compromise as a means of resolving differences and achieving mutual understanding.

We are concerned with securing justice and fairness in society and with eliminating discrimination and intolerance.

We believe in supporting the disadvantaged and the handicapped so that they will be able to help themselves.

We attempt to transcend divisive parochial loyalties based on race, religion, gender, nationality, creed, class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, and strive to work together for the common good of humanity.

We want to protect and enhance the earth, to preserve it for future generations, and to avoid inflicting needless suffering on other species.

We believe in enjoying life here and now and in developing our creative talents to their fullest.

We believe in the cultivation of moral excellence.

We respect the right to privacy. Mature adults should be allowed to fulfill their aspirations, to express their sexual preferences, to exercise reproductive freedom, to have access to comprehensive and informed health-care, and to die with dignity.

We believe in the common moral decencies: altruism, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, responsibility. Humanist ethics is amenable to critical, rational guidance. There are normative standards that we discover together. Moral principles are tested by their consequences.

We are deeply concerned with the moral education of our children. We want to nourish reason and compassion.

We are engaged by the arts no less than by the sciences.

We are citizens of the universe and are excited by discoveries still to be made in the cosmos.

We are skeptical of untested claims to knowledge, and we are open to novel ideas and seek new departures in our thinking.

We affirm humanism as a realistic alternative to theologies of despair and ideologies of violence and as a source of rich personal significance and genuine satisfaction in the service to others.

We believe in optimism rather than pessimism, hope rather than despair, learning in the place of dogma, truth instead of ignorance, joy rather than guilt or sin, tolerance in the place of fear, love instead of hatred, compassion over selfishness, beauty instead of ugliness, and reason rather than blind faith or irrationality.

We believe in the fullest realization of the best and noblest that we are capable of as human beings.

*by Paul Kurtz

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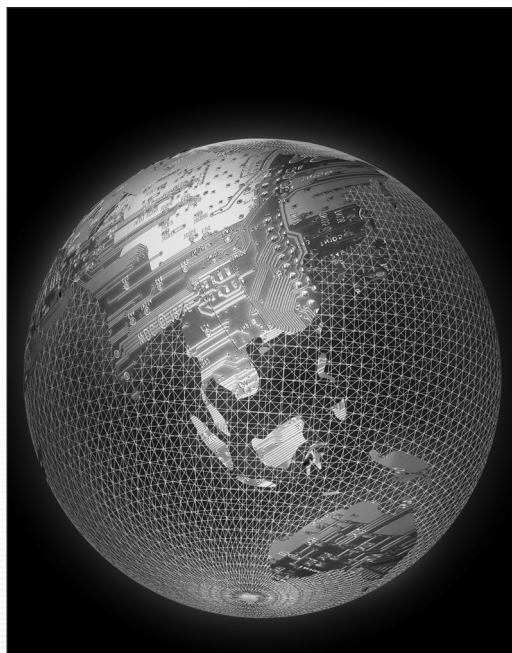
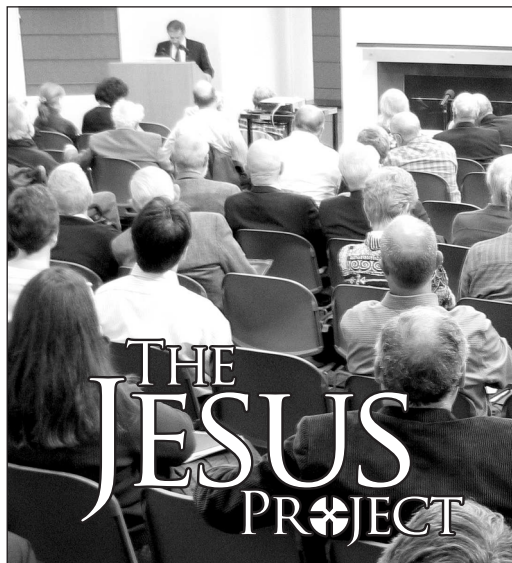
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EDITORIAL PAUL KURTZ



‘Yes’ to Naturalism, Secularism, and Humanism

A provocative new book by physicist and astronomer Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (Prometheus Books, 2007), reviews the scientific evidence for the existence of God and concludes that it is totally inadequate. Stenger has authored several books rejecting theism and supernaturalism. In his latest book, he considers the scientific case for God, including fine-tuning intelligent design and other forms of “evidence,” and arrives instead at the null hypothesis.

Like other illustrious FREE INQUIRY contributors who have recently published noteworthy books critical of religion, no doubt Stenger will also be labeled an “evangelical atheist,” a generic term of denigration used to describe scientific critics of the God hypothesis. To invoke a colorful phrase from an earlier era (coined by William Safire for Spiro Agnew), theists believe that we are “nabobs of negativity.” Quite the contrary, we affirm that, however imperfect, we are paragons of rationality, understanding, virtue, and excellence; or, at least, we strive to be. We are interested in enhancing human life, not undermining it; we are not naysayers, for we wish to realize the goodness of life for ourselves and others.

No one can deny that we are skeptical of the God hypothesis; we are, because we find insufficient scientific evidence for accepting it. Still, we cannot be defined by what we are against. We do not think there is evidence for supernaturalism; we are surely *nontheists*, but that does not mean that we should be *simply* defined as atheists. We do not believe in the Tooth Fairy, or Santa Claus either, but that does not define us. We do not think that our agenda—that is, the agenda of *naturalism*—should depend on the agendas of others, least of all on the agenda of *theism*.

Scientific critics of theism, in my view, are to be *applauded* for making it clear why they cannot accept the God hypothesis and why they reject the theistic tales and parables of the past. Although those tales may have been meaningful to men and women of earlier epochs, they no longer resonate with most modern humans in the midst of our planetary civilization. Contending with planetary crises

Paul Kurtz is Editor in Chief of FREE INQUIRY, a professor emeritus of philosophy at the University at Buffalo, the State University of New York, and Chairman of the Center for Inquiry/Transnational.

requires that we do more than simply reject theological claims: we must assert new and useful recommendations concerning the human condition. I concede, of course, that we are atheists—but the key point is that *we are more than that*.

The real question for us is what we are *for*. Three terms to describe our position come readily to mind: first, we are *scientific naturalists*; second, we believe in the principles of *secularism*; and third, we are committed to *humanist ethics*. Actually, we do not begin with the fact that God, as a personal being, does not exist but rather with the world and human life as we find them; we seek to describe these things and explain them in natural terms. The perspective of scientific naturalism is *nature first and foremost*, not the unknown transcendental world of the theist. We begin with actual facticity, things or events that we encounter in experience; and, there, we find order and regularity, contingency and chance, change and process. For primitive human beings, the world was mystifying, full of unexpected tragedies and conflicts, sickness and death, danger and fear. Humans in the infancy of the race attributed thunder and lightning to hidden gods and the seasons of change, birth, maturity, illness, and death to mysterious occult forces, which they considered divine and, hence, supplicated for relief and favor. They looked to what in time became an entrenched priestly class that orchestrated sacrifice, prayer, and ritual to placate the deities.

Humankind has come a long way since then. In particular, we have discovered the causes of many of the phenomena that terrified our ancestors. Naturalistic explanations of tornadoes and forest

“No one can deny that we are skeptical of the God hypothesis, because we find insufficient scientific evidence for accepting it. Still, we cannot be defined by what we are against.”

fires, famine, and epidemics have replaced occult accounts. Historically, first philosophy and later science attempted to provide cognitive tools for interpreting nature and learning how to cope with it. Illnesses had certain symptoms that could be cured; death was a natural fact of all living things, though we could reduce pain and suffering, contribute significantly to health and happiness, and even extend life. Supernaturalism was thus replaced by naturalism. More effective methods of inquiry enabled us to postulate hypotheses and develop theories to explain phenomena and confirm our theories by experimental methods and the use of logical inference.

SCIENTIFIC NATURALISM

Thus, we insist that we are naturalists—not atheists—*first*, because we seek to use the best available tools of critical thinking and scientific inquiry to account for what we encounter in nature. We do not think that the concept of God (or gods) is helpful any longer. To attribute pestilence or disaster to the wrath of the gods is an oversimplification of what happens and why. We reject the ancient mind's simple invocation of hidden deities who reward or punish human behavior. We do not deny that the universe is often a scene of inexplicable events. Yet, in part because we have learned to explain so much, we are willing to suspend judgment about that

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which we still do not know. We approach these matters in the position of equipoise, as an agnostic, with an open mind—though not an open sink into which any wild anthropocentric, speculative fantasy can fall and be accepted as true. I have called this principle the “new skepticism.” Doubt is part and parcel of scientific inquiry; under the principle of fallibilism (formulated by Charles Peirce), we recognize that we may be mistaken. Hence, we should be ever ready to modify our conceptions of nature in the light of new evidence, confirming our hypotheses and theories by reference to the data of human experience and rational inference, not faith or fear, mystery or superstition.

What matters is that we begin by opening the “Book of Nature,” not ancient books of scripture, such as the Bible or the Qur’an—testaments of early human civilizations that were prescientific and prephilosophical. Thus, we say we are naturalists, using scientific inquiry to develop reliable knowledge.

That is why I have resisted the efforts of our critics to label us solely as atheists, although our method of inquiry does lead most of us to atheism or agnosticism. On the contrary, we begin with an open mind, a process of investigation and inquiry, research and exploration, dialogue and debate, and we insist on applying the best methods of objectivity, corroboration, and replication to work out explanations of what we find in nature.

We are skeptical of both the belief that God is a person who communicated with a limited number of specially chosen prophets at some remote time in history and that faith in God is the only solution to life’s quandaries. This seems to us to be an anthropomorphic imposition of human hopes and fears into nature, an attempt to bypass this life by yearning for salvation in the next. Life may cause the bitter tears of tragedy to fall, as doubtlessly it did for so many of our ancient forebears. But, today, it can provide abundant opportunities for achieving the good life and creating the conditions in which we can achieve some measure of harmonious social justice. We need to cope with the disappointments, adversities, and infirmities of life, if and when they occur, by summoning our best resources to cope with them and endure in spite of them.

I reiterate that we are *naturalists* because we begin with the world as we find it; we do not seek to leap beyond it, even while we strive to understand it fully, in all its most mysterious complexity. We maintain that humans are capable of developing a critical understanding of how nature works and why. We are committed to the use of science and reason, and we wish to educate the public about it. This does not qualify us as evangelists, only as *educators*.

HUMANIST MORAL VALUES AND PRINCIPLES

A second charge hurled at us today is the claim that naturalists lack any grounds for morality. This overlooks the fact that human civilization has developed powerful moral principles and values rooted in human experience and reason, not in God. Witness Confucianism in ancient China, philosophers such as Socrates and Aristotle in Hellenic civilization, and the long march of secularization in the modern world, in which the principles of democracy and toleration, negotiation and compromise, reason and inquiry have replaced reliance on the faith and authority of theological-moral creeds.

That is why secular humanism is virtually synonymous with modernism. That is why we say we are secularists, seeking the realization of autonomous human values, independent of theology. That is also why we are committed to the separation of church—or mosque or temple—and state, and why we consider political liberties so vital and theocracy so dangerous. This demands some confidence in human reason and our ability to create a better world.

In short, *secular humanists are committed to realizing the best that we are capable of as human beings*; we wish to use our creative powers to develop the arts as well as the sciences, to fulfill our potentialities, and to enhance human freedom in a just world. We deplore supernaturalists’ attempts to flee from reason and freedom. We say that life is, or can be, intrinsically good in its own terms, without looking outward for deliverance. Countless generations of humans have, indeed, found it meaningful, a source of enrichment and enjoyment.

THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY

Another likely reason there has been so much opposition to naturalism and its

Enlightenment agenda is because believers fear that we will take away from them the support that religion had provided in the past. Religious institutions may have endured so long because they offer comfort to those buffeted by the vicissitudes of life: fortune or ruin, pleasure or pain, the unpredictable but inescapable coming of disease, defeat, and, finally, death. Perhaps that is why devout religionists hate and fear “blasphemers,” as we are sometimes called. They view us as threatening to whisk away the props that sustain them. This is an understandable fear but an unnecessary one all the same. It is as foolish to believe that, if most people stopped believing in God, all moral standards would collapse as it is to think that gravity will someday no longer press our feet to the floor when we get out of bed in the morning. Indeed, secular moral standards often predated Judeo-Christian values.

This raises an existential-psychological question. The books of Abraham present the mythic figures of Moses (an imposing, patriarchal figure, offering the Promised Land to God’s “chosen people”); Jesus (a bisexual, androgynous Son, sacrificed by God so that true believers can achieve “Rapture”); and Muhammad (a harsh prophet threatening hellfire, torture, and violence to those who do not submit to Allah but promising paradise to those who do). Can naturalists create secular communities of equal strength and support to help those burdened by the vicissitudes of fortune?

In his insightful new book defending Darwin, *Living with Darwin: Evolution, Design, and the Future of Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2007), Philip Kitcher, the John Dewey Professor at Columbia University, argues that secularists should not seek to destroy the existential-psychological forms of solace and comfort that many religions offer *unless* they are prepared to provide *new* foundations—new sources of community and comfort that can provide the aesthetic and moral dimensions for new forms of “spirituality” realized in naturalistic terms.

Not everyone feels this way. Some libertarian secularists are so relieved to be emancipated from the stranglehold of orthodox religious communities that they do not wish to enter new humanist communities. Yet all too many individuals in contemporary, affluent societies feel

alienated and lost. They are surrounded by a banal consumer culture; a competitive free-market economy where the winners go the spoils; a vulgar mass media saturated with advertising, sensationalism, fear-mongering, violence, and mayhem. They ask how they can find deeper meaning and motivation in the fast-paced culture in which we live *without* drawing on Jesus, Muhammad, Buddha, or the Kabbalah.


Given that the mythic system of ancient beliefs has been undermined by the scientific outlook, can we create new symbols appropriate to the Age of Science, new metaphors for human possibility, new sources of inspiration and hope, and a new resolve to go on living in spite of adversity?

No doubt, our commitment to truth comes first, but we cannot overlook the power of affection and love in enriching our lives. Caring for other persons as they care for us can soothe the aching

heart in times of grief and open it up to laughter and joy, devotion and creativity. The love shared between parents and children, sisters and brothers, companions and partners, friends and colleagues builds supportive bonds of shared experience. We learn to develop an attitude of goodwill toward others in our face-to-face communities of interaction and also, in time, to transcend local and parochial interests for the wider community of humankind. We do not need to believe in God to extend sympathy and altruism beyond our ethnic and racial groupings—and ultimately to all human beings on the planet Earth.

Thus, the challenge we face is whether we can create alternative institutions that satisfy the hunger for meaning, that satisfy our ideals, that support sympathetic communities, that are able to provide comfort in times of stress. We need alternative institutions that will support us in appreciating the majestic

reality of the universe, in forging our determination to enter into nature, to understand how it operates, and, ultimately, to build a better world—to bring about a more creatively joyful life for ourselves and others in the new planetary civilization that is emerging.

We say “Yes” to the rational and passionate dimensions of life and “Yes” to the affirmative principles of humanist ethics. We *can* discover and luxuriate in the boundless potentialities of the good life. This, I submit, is the bountiful existential-psychological fountain from which we need to draw in order to supplant the God hypothesis. We need to affirm our commitment to the possibilities of achieving the fullness of life. Let us eat both of the “fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil” and of the “fruit of the tree of life!” We need to cultivate ethical wisdom and to appreciate the intrinsic value of life for its own sake. 

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Appreciating the Human Perspective

John M. Novak

I am a humanist because I find myself wedded to the human perspective. Other than when “death do us part” or through lapsing into states of profound unconsciousness, I do not know how to get out of that union. The human perspective—for better or worse, for richer or poorer—is what we operate from. Anything we take in, interpret, and put out comes from this perspective. Even to imagine otherwise is to maneuver from within the human perspective.

“. . . Dawkins’s book, while saying ‘no’ to wishful thinking and escapism, is saying ‘yes’ to the self-correcting methods and findings of science and the truly awesome gains in perspective that are opened up as we venture forth to go where no human (or perhaps any other being) has gone before.”

As an educator, I work to make people enthusiastic about the human perspective by emphasizing the “for better” and “for richer” parts of experience. To savor, understand, and improve the human perspective wherever and whenever possible seems to me the primary educational concern. Efforts that make us numb or dumb are deprecations of this undertaking. Efforts that get us to

appreciate what *was, is, could be*, and *should be* contribute to this project.

This past year there were three books that contributed to this humanist educational project: Daniel C. Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell*, Sam Harris’s *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*. Each of these books was an intelligently designed big bang, with shots still being heard both within and without the United States. Because of their rebellious tone toward the “sacred nature” of what they criticize, one of the predictable and consistent retaliatory shots fired back at these authors is the charge that they are zealous naysayers, taking gleeful, abrasive delight in destroying cherished beliefs. This criticism seems to miss the educational point of what these authors are trying to do. While it is certainly true that each author, in his own way, is trying to start a rebellion and is saying “no” to some key aspects of religious thinking, none is a pure negativist. Each of the authors sees cracks in the religious egg and thinks the yolk is on us.

In the spirit of Albert Camus’s *The Rebel*, I see each author emphatically saying “no” because a larger “yes” is not being realized. This larger “yes” is the desire to appreciate a more educational life, to live in a more open, intelligent, and responsible way. For example, Dawkins’s book, while saying “no” to wishful thinking and escapism, is saying “yes” to the self-correcting methods and findings of science and the truly awesome gains in perspective that are opened up as we venture forth to go where no human (or perhaps any other being) has gone before. This is heady stuff and needs both a strong dose of ambition and humility. Dennett, while saying “no” to unexamined beliefs and

unquestioned practices, is saying “yes” to free, multidisciplinary inquiry into how an important institution informs our lives in often subtle and unseen ways. His “yes” is a desire for us to take the human perspective below the surface and examine the underlying psychological and social structures that influence

“. . . Dennett, Dawkins, and Harris have . . . enabled us to feel the value of living wide-awake.”

what we feel, see, and do, so we can live a more centered and engaged life. Harris, in his short follow-up to his award winning *The End of Faith*, is saying “no” to unexamined doctrine and the marriage of church and state but “yes” to responsible living through a passionate commitment to cognitive and moral honesty.

In challenging key aspects of our cultural, intellectual, and moral life, Dennett, Dawkins, and Harris have deepened the appreciation of the human perspective through three meanings of the word *appreciate*. First, they have enabled us to feel the value of living wide-awake. Consciousness, for them, is not that annoying time between naps but our window to the world and to new and responsible ways of being. We have only just begun to open our eyes. Second, the three authors have enabled us to better understand the inner workings and the social infrastructure of the human perspective. The meaning of being evolved, embodied, social problem solvers with desires that we wish to make desirable ethically and aesthetically opens up new ways to think about our individual and collective lives. Third, these authors have empowered the intentional growth of the human perspective by providing more detail, insight, and responsibility to the cognitive and moral *Zeitgeist*. The human perspective is richer and deeper because of their work.

Our efforts to enrich and deepen the human perspective can be enhanced by learning to speak the language of appreciation in different parts of our individual and collective lives. Moving from the personal to the societal global level would involve increasing the use of five key appreciative words: *wow*, *we*, *if*, *yes*, and *perhaps*. Each of these words is not meant to be a special incantation that enables us to short-circuit complexity. The conscientious use of each word can break some old habits and be illustrative of an appreciative stance regarding the human experience.

“At the personal level, we can be open to more of life’s experiences by finding *bona fide* ways to say ‘wow’ to more of the world around us.”

At the personal level, we can be open to more of life’s experiences by finding *bona fide* ways to say “wow” to more of the world around us. This takes an intentional effort to move beyond the taken-for-granted aspects of life and look for activities that extend our perspectives. In my own life, scuba diving gives me an exuberant feeling. It opens up an undersea world that, literally, takes me below the surface. Part of my appreciation of that experience is the recognition of the efforts, ingenuity, and technology that make it possible. In addition, being underwater and seeing the conditions of the coral reefs enables me to witness firsthand both the beauty and the fragility of sea life. I would like my potential future grandchildren’s grandchildren to be able to enjoy this beauty.

At the interpersonal level—the level of connecting with others—I suggest we learn to expand the use of the word *we*. Saying *we* moves an individual beyond his or her personal perspective into the world that is shared with others. As Richard Rorty points out, fighting cruelty and oppression is not about some verti-

cal assent to some final abstract truth. Rather, it is about the horizontal progression of authentically including more and more people in our growing perspective. Peter Singer calls this “expanding the circle,” as our “we” moves from tribal to national and, finally, to global inclusiveness. Authentically saying *we* is recognizing and creating fundamental human connectedness.

In the process of seeking to understand more of the world and the people we share it with, it is essential to learn to use one of the key words of science and ethical inquiry: the word *if*. *If* enables us to operate in the hypothetical realm and consider possibilities that go beyond our ingrained habits. For example, Richard Dawkins shows how scientific exploration takes us beyond our usual ways of looking at things. Because parts of nature operate under different assumptions than the ones we use in our daily lives, we have to imaginatively use the hypothetical *if* to try to make sense of these realms. This expands the human perspective into the realm of the corroborated counter-intuitive and opens up the previously unimagined. Moving to our ethical understanding of others, an imaginative use of *if* enables us to consider their perceptions and the possible effects of our actions. If we did not have *if*, we would be living on the severely impoverished side of the “richer-or-poorer” human perspective line.

As we move to the world of work, the world of productivity, we need to find creative ways to put more “yes” into our human organizations. If we see human organizations as potentially ethically sound enterprises designed to bring us more of the goods of life, then we have to create organizational schemes that are able to be evaluated and build on the positive things people do and would like to do. Such synergistic organizational qualities allow people to become smarter than they would on their own and act according to the creation of shared meanings rather than entrenched positions. Getting to “yes” organizationally extends the human perspective by opening up new worlds of collective possibilities.

Finally, at the global societal level, learning to use the word *perhaps* can enable us to engage each other in substantive, informed, and productive conversations. I became convinced of the power of *perhaps* during a conversation

with my daughter on a ski-lift chair when she was eleven years old. As we were going up the lift, I attempted to tell her about John Dewey’s theory of continuity and interaction. I explained to her how everything in the universe has led up to where we are now, and that what we do now will affect all that will come. Her

“. . . the word *perhaps*, if sincerely used, means that we have found something we can say ‘yes’ to in what another person has said and are wowed by the possibility of extending the conversation.”

response was a stunning silence followed ten seconds later by the word *perhaps*. She then said that, upon reflection, she understood the point I was making, but noted that, if we got sucked into a black hole, what we did now would not matter. I was surprised by her response. Silent for a few seconds, I responded, “Perhaps,” and then added that it mattered now and that should count for something. She replied, “Perhaps,” and the conversation has continued for the past two decades.

It seems to me that the word *perhaps*, if sincerely used, means that we have found something we can say “yes” to in what another person has said and are wowed by the possibility of extending the conversation. It would be naïve to think it is easy, but it would be cynical to think that this is not possible. Saying “no” to cynicism and “yes” to appreciating more of the human perspective is carrying on the best of the educational project of Dennett, Dawkins, and Harris.



John M. Novak is a professor of education at Brock University and a past president of the Society of Professors of Education.

Humanism as Existentialism

A Conversation with Robert Solomon

FREE INQUIRY was saddened by the recent death of philosopher Robert Solomon. Highly regarded for his contribution to business ethics and the philosophy of emotions, he also wrote extensively on the history of philosophy, totaling more than forty books, including *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life* (Doubleday, 1976); *The Joy of Philosophy* (Oxford, 1999); *Spirituality for the Skeptic: The Thoughtful Love of Life* (Oxford, 2002); and *Living with Nietzsche* (Oxford, 2003). Prominently featured in the film *Waking Life*, Solomon taught for over thirty-five years at the University of Texas at Austin. Last year, he spoke with D.J. Grothe (the Center for Inquiry's director of Campus and Community Programs) at the Dog and Duck Pub in Austin, Texas. In their conversation, a portion of which is printed below, they discussed humanism, religion, and existentialism.

FREE INQUIRY: The philosopher Jean Paul Sartre wrote an essay in the 1940s titled "Existentialism Is a Humanism." Is existentialism still a valid way of looking at the world?

ROBERT SOLOMON: Whenever I give a course in it at the university, it is always filled up the first day. Students are fascinated by it—and not just as an historical curiosity—but because it has something to teach them about how to live.

FI: They like it because it has something to teach them or because it is hip and popular?

SOLOMON: I think both. For those in the know, existentialism is no longer hip and cool—after all, it is at least forty-five years old. Some students actually take the course because it talks about how they should live their lives. And whether

they're religious or nonreligious, existentialism focuses on taking responsibility for their own lives. (If the choices they make are religious choices, fine, but they can't simply foist their responsibility off on institutions or circumstances.)

FI: So existentialism is the philosophy of personal responsibility?

SOLOMON: That's a way of describing it that I would favor most. Front and center in existentialism is the argument over personal responsibility. In Sartre, "one becomes," and so on. It's also in Nietzsche, if less straightforwardly.

FI: Is existentialism still a humanism, the kind of humanism alive in the world today as a social and political movement?

SOLOMON: Hard to say. Contemporary humanism—Paul Kurtz's humanism, for example—has a fairly strong scientific bias to it. It embraces science in a way that Sartre never did. Sartre is really referencing eighteenth-century humanism, focusing more on the fact that values are *human* values, the world is a *human* world. For Sartre, humanism means: "It's our world; we make of it what we will."

FI: Sartre has this line that reminds me of Kurtz: that existentialists shouldn't be defined by their pessimism but by the sternness of their optimism.

SOLOMON: Yes. I think Sartre's getting at two things there. First, since existentialists often talk about the world as being without ultimate values and being ultimately meaningless, most people take existentialism to be a doctrine of despair. Sartre says that, no, that's not existentialism at all. Instead, if there is no ultimate meaning to the universe, then we should at least have a certain confidence in ourselves, since we can't have confidence in the uni-

verse. The universe may not be for us, but *we* can be for us.

The second idea was put well by a colleague years ago: most theological types tell you that life without God would be intolerable. It is actually just the opposite: life *with* God would be intolerable. Oppressive. Thank God that He doesn't exist, since that means you're actually free to make your own decisions and do something with your life that's important.

FI: What could a secular humanist get out of reading the existentialists?

SOLOMON: More than a mere atheist could. The secular humanist can appreciate the emphatic focus on *human* existence in existentialism: that this is the one life you have to live, so make of it what you can. It seems to me that this is also an explicitly secular humanist theme.

FI: You said "mere atheist." Are you an atheist?

SOLOMON: I wouldn't call myself just an atheist . . . people who call themselves atheists are just denying a very specific conception of God. And, even though I also deny that conception of God—I find it unintelligible, ethnocentric, and confined to the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition—the most interesting questions about religion and spirituality are global, not just Western. Buddhists don't believe in that god, but are they atheists? That question doesn't make much sense. It isn't enough to say, "I don't believe in what most Christians believe." That is not enough.

FI: What more is necessary?

SOLOMON: Oh, I think a commitment not to just reject the beliefs of others but to decide what you do believe in. There is nothing in atheism that is a positive philosophy. That's why I much prefer talking about secular humanism. Atheism is kind of provincial nay-saying—"I don't believe in the God that you believe in." But secular humanism does promote a set of values. Most of the existentialists we've been talking about endorse these same values: human freedom, creativity, responsibility, living passionately, mutual understanding (even if this isn't as developed as it should be in existentialism). In fact, maybe humanism is a type of existentialism. **FI**

IGNITE THE ADVENTURE



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– Jacob Bronowski, scientific polymath

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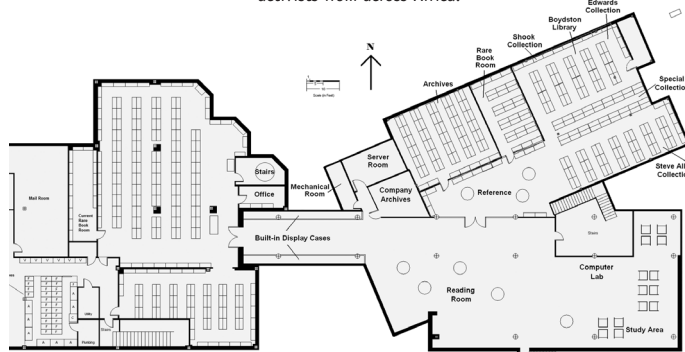
Toni Van Pelt, Paul Kurtz, Ron Lindsay (standing) and Lawrence Krauss, David Helfland, and Nobel Laureate Paul Boyer (seated) introduced the Declaration in Defense of Science and Secularism at the inaugural press conference of the Center for Inquiry/Office of Public Policy in Washington, D.C.



Local leaders, campus activists, and students from around the world came together at CFI's 2006 Summer Session.

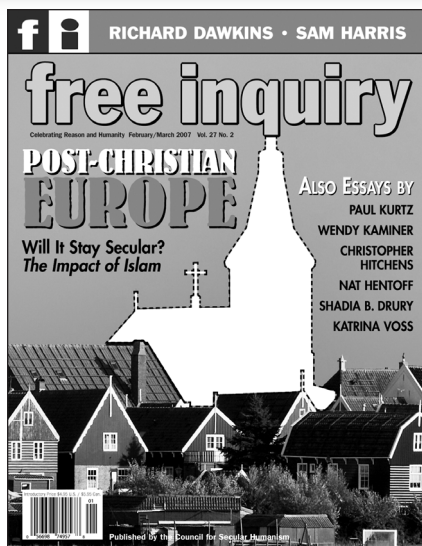


This CFI-sponsored humanist conference in Nigeria attracted activists from across Africa.



The new Naturalism Research Project will more than double our library facilities and create a collegial setting for scholarly dialogue and research.





A Matter of Manners

Exactly what was Julian Baggini complaining about when he criticized the likes of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett in his February/March 2007 *FREE INQUIRY* article, “Toward a More Mannerly Secularism”? That they are not mannered? That such “secularists are in danger of making remarkably similar mistakes” as the Bush administration has in Iraq, while granting that they opposed the policies of the Bush administration?

When Baggini claims that “Secularists have also misjudged the mood of the people they have purportedly liberated,” what secularists and what people are he talking about? Certainly not the Bush administration, which is not particularly secular. Are the people he is referring to Iraqis? Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett “liberated” the Iraqis?

I’ve seen these gentlemen in person and on television and have read their books and articles, and, if there is one thing that you can be assured of, it is that they *never* threaten or advocate violence or propose limitations on civil liberties. They are blunt, indeed, in their critiques of religion but are always polite and personable when dealing with audiences and interviewers. Their advocacy of subjecting religion to critical scrutiny is a far more “mannered” undertaking than stifling or discouraging such criticism (not to mention killing such critics).

Now check out what Mr. Baggini says about most people: “The reason they haven’t become atheists is that many people use the freedom to think what they want to *not think very much at all*” (my emphasis).

This is pretty much equivalent to calling most people “brain-dead,” and it reveals where the contempt really exists—Baggini apparently prefers not ruffling the feathers of what he considers the zombie-like masses, while Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett are attempting to reach out to their fellow human beings at the risk of being personally ostracized.

Gerry Dantone

Coordinator, Center for Inquiry
Community of Long Island
Greenlawn, New York

Stressing Strauss

The two views of Leo Strauss’s work (*FI*, February/March 2007) seem to agree on one matter: his attachment to uncritical patriotism and religion. In “Exterminating the Enemy,” Shadia Drury writes, “Strauss believed that to be strong a society must cultivate citizens with a fanatical devotion to its values and its interests. Citizens must believe that their society is an incarnation of truth and goodness, that their nation is beloved by God, and that its enemies are evil.” Drury explicitly deplores the parallels between Strauss’s theories and those of the members of the current American administration. In the same issue, Nathan Bupp’s review of Drury’s book on Strauss’s complex ideas provides a more nuanced view of Strauss’s complex ideas and provides more information about Strauss’s life as a Jew who fled Nazi Germany. In Bupp’s view, “Strauss was heavily influenced by his early experiences in the Weimar Republic, his model for liberal democracy, for which he had huge contempt. In his view, it was the democratic liberalism of the Weimar Republic that ultimately paved the way for the Nazi Holocaust and the slaughter of the Jews. Hence, Strauss’s general antipathy toward democracy.” Earlier, after quoting Strauss’s views on the hierarchical type of society he favored, Bupp con-

cludes: “This amounts to the need for a populace to be steeped in fervent religiosity and rabid nationalism.”

So Strauss was disappointed by the weakness of the Weimar Republic and then horrified by the Nazi regime that took advantage of it? But the Nazi regime succeeded by being precisely the type of regime that both Drury and Bupp describe as Strauss’s ideal. A most painful conflict.

John Forester

Lemon Grove, California

Forget about It!

Derek Araujo (“Ten Years of Campus Activism,” *FI*, February/March 2007) may be the best cheerleader secular humanism ever had, but, as a prognosticator, he failed miserably when he wrote, “With energy and commitment, we cannot only stand against this tide [the war he thinks religion is waging against secular humanism], we can turn it and make the twenty-first century ‘The Century of American Secularism.’” That will not happen in this century, the next, or ever. Religions are too deeply rooted for secular humanists to eradicate them. Besides, look what they offer their followers that humanism can’t match: hope that, when they die, they will see their loved ones who have passed on; hope that they will find seventy-two virgins awaiting them in heaven; hope that, after death, they will reside in a land where the lion will lie down with the lamb; hope that, with each rebirth, they will have a chance to rid themselves of all their bad karma; and, most important of all, hope that the good who die will be rewarded and the bad punished. Can you think of a better sales pitch? Put it up against the humanist philosophy that when you die you become a cosmic cinder and see how many converts you get.

Religions have weathered scandals involving pedophile priests, deviant clergymen, cult serial killers, and minister whoremongers. To wage war against them is a fool’s mission. With their mega-churches, their globe-encircling radio programs, and charismatic televangelists, they have all the weapons needed to withstand any attempts to destroy them.

All this stuff about a positive vision that speaks to all of humanity is bunk and a waste of time. The masses want what makes them feel good: hope. It is their champagne, distilled from vineyards of sadness and despair.

Harold R. Larimer
Leesburg, Florida

Morality without God

Was Professor Dawkins (“Collateral Damage,” *FI*, February/March 2007) being serious when he wrote (on p. 13), “I don’t know why the [shifting moral] *Zeitgeist* changes so consistently . . .”? I think he knows very well why. Then he suggests it may be “something” in the air at dinner parties. Pretty close, Professor Dawkins. Try “custom.”

When I left the Catholic priesthood, my brother asked me seriously: “How can you be a moral man without God and the Church?” The answer remains what it was then: “I live reasonably, true to my rational self; and there is no more reasonable means to good morality than the Golden Rule; this was customary long before the birth of Christianity.”

Humankind’s syncretic progress has been, *very* broadly, from pantheism to polytheism to monotheism and, slowly, toward a pragmatic atheism. Of course, before atheism can become customary, our society must evolve beyond today’s official intransigence in Washington and Iraq.

Looking to an increasingly scientific future, it is helpful to understand the basic meaning of morality. Etymologically, *morality* comes from the Latin *mos* (custom), *moris* (of custom). So “*res moris*” simply means “a matter of custom”; the phrase “customary morality” is a tautology. Similarly, the Greek *ethos* (custom) gives us our word *ethics*; and, again, the phrase “customary ethics” is repetitive.

This kind of basic thinking upsets those believing God commands and inspires a defined code of morality. No, human customs, developing through the continuous processes of syncretism, are adapted, adopted, or rejected, based on whether they work or not.

This is how we progress, we throw off customs and mores that are no longer helpful or progressive; we keep and modify those customs (ethics) that contribute to humankind’s progress (mostly for good) extremely slowly because of powerful interests vested in the faith-based superstitious past. (This is adapted from pp. 151–52 of my *Imagine No Superstition*.)

Stephen F. Uhl
Oro Valley, Arizona

In Richard Dawkins’s February/March 2007 op-ed, he describes a house and restaurant in Baghdad that were bombed to rubble with the intent to kill Saddam Hussein, who, it turns out, wasn’t even there. The only result was “collateral damage” of innocent diners. Sam Harris, in his book *The End of Faith* (p. 142), justifies the morality of “collateral” deaths in Iraq on the rationale that maiming and carnage, no matter how awful, is not George W. Bush’s *intent* but rather the product of imperfect weapons and intelligence reports.

Are we to argue that intent or lack thereof justifies bombing a restaurant

at dinner time? The act was not accidental, so wouldn’t we call it terrorism if it were our own families in that restaurant? Though unintended, the death of civilians is known in advance to be inevitable, whether in the choice to bomb a restaurant or in the choice of starting a preemptive war. Isn’t there an old religious quotation about the road to hell being paved with good intentions? I prefer the logic of Paul Kurtz’s affirmation that the morality of an act is tested by its consequences.

With collateral damage known to be inevitable (examining the intelligence and bombing errors of the past decade’s armed conflicts would confirm this), we can no more justify such an act than we could justify blowing up a bank with employees and hostages to halt a robbery attempt or bombing Michigan after learning the location of the Oklahoma City Federal Building bomber.

Still, I was delighted that Dawkins finds evidence of long-term improvement in our civilization’s scruples. In the same issue, Wendy Kaminer shows how to communicate the secular point

(Continued on page 65)

Philip Appleman, a long-time supporter of FREE INQUIRY and the Council for Secular Humanism, sent us the following poem in response—though not opposition—to Paul Kurtz’s objection to the media’s use of the bland expression sectarian violence when referring to religious fighting in Iraq (or, by extension, elsewhere). As FI Editor Tom Flynn points out, “Appleman is about as close to a poet laureate as humanism gets,” so we’re happy to present this poetic response.

—THE EDITORS

Mr. Euphemism Admonishes the Skeptics

You secular humanists say it’s a “War Of Religion,” but that’s just impertinence:
This isn’t “Religious Warfare,”
It’s only Sectarian Violence.

You atheists seem interested only in
Something that you can revile, hence
You babble “Religious Warfare”
When it’s nothing but Sectarian Violence.

It’s true we kill thousands of heathens, because
They’re infidels in the most vile sense—
But don’t say “Religious Warfare”
When it’s merely Sectarian Violence.

—Philip Appleman

TOM FLYNN

Prospective Impact: The Jesus Project

As a rule, FREE INQUIRY focuses more on issues of the real world and less on horn blowing for the Council for Secular Humanism and related organizations. Please indulge this exception. A new initiative by the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (CSER)—a project launched by the Council twenty-five years ago, now affiliated with the Center for Inquiry—deserves a moment’s acknowledgment and, to my mind, some sustained applause.

In classic “no free lunch” fashion, before I share the good news, I’m going to make you slog through some history. Twenty-five years ago, in 1982, FREE INQUIRY announced formation of the Religion and Biblical Criticism Research Project. Founded by *FI* Senior Editor Gerald A. Larue, a scholar of religion based at the University of Southern California, the Project’s original mission was to encourage dissemination of the findings of more than a century of biblical criticism and archeological discovery. The Project attracted distinguished associates and, with time, broadened its mission.

In April 1985, it convened what remains to this day the best-attended conference FREE INQUIRY has ever sponsored: “Jesus in History and Myth.” It was coordinated by the brash young academic R. Joseph Hoffmann, then an associate professor of religion at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where the event was held. It drew an impressive “who’s who” in religion studies with its promise of reopening an inquiry that professional scholarship had set aside decades before: *Did the historical Jesus exist? If so, what can we know of him?*



I attended that conference, a star-struck young volunteer charged with engineering the conference audiotapes. I witnessed the unprecedented excitement that it generated. “Jesus in History and Myth” alerted academe that curiosity about the historicity of Jesus had been rekindled among both scholars and the educated public. In short order, the Religion and Biblical Criticism Research Project donned a punchier name—the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (CSER)—and young Hoffmann joined Gerald Larue among its leaders.

In those early days, FREE INQUIRY and its sponsoring organization lacked the capacity to exploit all the fascination that “Jesus in History and Myth” had unleashed. Robert Funk, a bigger-than-life, Montana-based scholar who had also attended the Ann Arbor conference, was better situated. Moving quickly, Funk cofounded the Jesus Seminar. That well-known moveable feast of high-profile religion scholars—theologians, mostly—convened several times a year, always in the public spotlight, to argue over (and vote on) which Gospel sayings had been

attributed to Jesus that the historical Jesus actually said. The idea that Jesus might not have existed was off-limits, perhaps understandably in a group dominated by confessional theologians. Still, when the Jesus Seminar finished deconstructing the Gospels, it had blacklined more than 80 percent of the “words of Jesus” as inauthentic. A related book, *The Fifth Gospel*, became a best seller.

With Funk’s death in 2005, the Jesus Seminar lost momentum. Fortunately, over the intervening years CSER (yes, pronounced like “Caesar”) had matured. Following a peripatetic academic career, including stints at Oxford, Beirut, and in the South Seas, R. Joseph Hoffmann had returned to an American college—and come to realize that his deepest research interests might be better served one step outside of academe. Assuming the helm of CSER, he coordinated a noteworthy 2004 conference on “The Just War and Jihad” at Cornell University. By 2006, CSER had been transferred from the Council for Secular Humanism’s aegis to that of the Center for Inquiry, preparing it for a broader scope of operations, and Hoffmann accepted an appointment as the Center’s Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs.

Fast forward to January 25–28, 2007, when CSER convened its second “new series” conference, “Scripture and Skepticism,” at the University of California, Davis. Again, the roster of speakers featured many of the most distinguished names in the field. (Again, I was there pushing electrons, though by now I’ve clawed my way up to recording not just audio but video.) And, again, as it had been in Ann Arbor, the excitement was palpable.

On Sunday, January 28, panelists including Paul Kurtz; Hoffmann; prominent religion scholar Van A. Harvey; controversial theologian Gerd Lüdemann, author of this issue’s cover story; and biblical scholar Robert M. Price gathered at the head table to make a momentous announcement. CSER was at last ready to launch the research program its long-ago Ann Arbor conference had anticipat-

ed and would be able to do so on its own terms. The Jesus Project was unveiled.

End of history lesson. Now, what of tomorrow? The Jesus Project will empanel fifty carefully chosen academics from a wide range of disciplines: some theologians, to be sure, but also archeologists, social historians, classicists, experts in historical linguistics, and others. Their mission will be to apply the most current scholarship and methodologies to the questions that had sparked such passion at Ann Arbor, the questions the Jesus Seminar never confronted: *Did the historical Jesus even exist? If so, what can we know of him?* Armed with contemporary tools and another century of archeological discoveries, can today's best objective scholarship push past the point where Albert Schweitzer and his contemporaries judged these questions insoluble?

The Jesus Project will meet twice a year and publish its findings annually (though it will not conduct secret ballots using red and white marbles, as the Jesus Seminar did). At the end of five years, the Project intends to issue a final report. As one hallmark of the objectivity of its mission, that final report may—or may not—put the vexing questions of Jesus' historicity to rest. The possibility remains that today's scholars may find, like Schweitzer, that the truth about the historical Jesus *still* remains out of reach.

Since those electrifying days in 1985, I've been convinced that this approach to the "Jesus question" constitutes exactly the sort of inquiry that FREE INQUIRY, the Council, and the Center for Inquiry exist to grapple with. I couldn't be more excited to see that today CSER is preparing to conduct the Jesus Project as an objective inquiry (not an exercise in a priori scoffing), focusing some of the world's foremost scholars from a broad spectrum of disciplines.

What might result from this initiative? If cutting-edge research should yield incontrovertible proof that the founder of Christianity is a mythic construct, don't expect the world to change overnight. For one thing, millions of Christians will simply reject its findings. Additionally, among those who study religion objectively, it is already well known that new faiths can elicit immense personal sacrifices from first-

generation converts—despite their firsthand knowledge that the new faith's teachings don't quite align with ground truth. Consider the Mormon pioneers who knew Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, or both—warts and all—yet willingly laid down their lives for the church many of them had *seen* one or both of those men concoct from whole cloth. Nothing about the earliest Christians—not even the eagerness with which some of them embraced martyrdom—should be surprising to serious historians, if, as some scholars think, Christianity never had an actual Jesus but rather a gradually accreting "just-so" story about a figure by that name.

For the same reasons, we should not expect the Jesus Project's conclusions to sound the death knell for Christianity. Through most of the twentieth century, historically sophisticated Christian clergy and theologians made the choice to maintain their faith commitments despite their new understandings that, by and large, their religion's self-proclaimed founding events never *actually* occurred. That's not my idea of rationality, but it's the option many sophisticated liberals exercise. On the long view, it will be more than enough if the Jesus Project can help to create a climate that encourages more rank-and-file Christians to form similarly nuanced understandings of their faith. (If some of them take the

next two or three steps further, abandon supernaturalism, and embrace secular humanism, so much the better—but that cannot be our *goal*.) One might even hope that this process might provide an

THE JESUS PROJECT

example in light of which more Muslims in the West can come to understand their faith, too, as a historical artifact. Want to talk about prospective impact? That's impact enough for a dozen projects.

The Jesus Project *may* be the single most important commitment that the Center for Inquiry and its affiliated organizations—among them the Council for Secular Humanism, publisher of FREE INQUIRY—will ever make. I hope you will join me in giving it wholehearted support. **fi**

Tom Flynn is the editor of FREE INQUIRY.



R. Joseph Hoffmann, the director of the Center for Inquiry's Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (CSER), announces the launch of the Jesus Project at CSER's "Scripture and Skepticism" conference, held at the University of California, Davis.

DAVID KOEPSSELL

Against Solipsism

Sometimes, I just want to run away. Overwhelmed by the crushing din of a world filled with chatter, with pundits and politicians, peddlers and pedants pumped up on their own self-importance and spouting their platitudes, I long for solitude. Silence. Perhaps you, too, have had such moments. There is virtue in quiet introspection—even in nonintrospective quietude, uninterrupted by thought of any kind—mere experience. I snap out of it, eventually, propelled by the need to interact, to bounce ideas off of my peers, to engage in dialogue and argument. Human greatness, groundbreaking philosophy, and major scientific hypotheses might spring from such moments of solitude, but it is not nurtured through this impulse alone. Only through community with others, through interaction, can we create useful products of thought and move toward a better understanding of the universe.

Worshippers of the life of the mind must realize that no great work comes through isolation. Philosophy is meaningless if practiced alone. While Plato disdained observation of the world as a means to the truth, his students in the Academy would sneak out and actually observe the heavens to try to develop the mathematical models that Plato desired. More successful was Aristotle's Lyceum, where observation was encouraged. Emerging from the Middle Ages, the scientific academies of Europe thrived on intercourse among fellow empiricists who engaged in research programs designed to reveal the mysteries of nature.

Science works only by this method. We have a mythical notion of the scientist hunkered down, alone in his or her laboratory, having that "eureka" moment. But science is a social institution, thriving on interaction among colleagues and peers who gather for conferences and dialogue



through publications and in lunchrooms. Laboratories, too, function only through the ongoing, real-time collaboration of researchers pursuing similar goals. It would be a mistake for philosophers, or, indeed, any scholars, to ignore the success of the communitarian nature of science and lapse into solipsism. Self-centered introspection has led to some serious philosophical and analytical errors.

Francis Bacon described the difference between the methods of science and philosophy, the reason for the successes of science and for philosophy's failures:

Philosophy is most vigorous with its early authors, and exhibits a subsequent decline. The best explanation of these opposite fortunes is that, in the mechanical art, talents of many individuals combine to produce a single result, but in philosophy one individual talent destroys many. The many surrender themselves to the leadership of the one . . . and become incapable of adding anything new. For when philosophy is severed from its roots in experience, whence it sprouted and grew, it becomes a dead thing.

As mentioned above, Plato erred largely in his method. He considered reason capable of exercise in isolation. On his view, the mysteries of the universe could be revealed through mere

contemplation. Plato conceived his metaphysics, that dreadful dualism that separates the realm of the "ideal" from the world and makes the world of thought superior to the "shadowy" world most of us consider to be the real world. This dualism infected Western Christian philosophy, marking the path to medieval scholasticism and effectively delaying empiricist methodology for more than a millennium in the west. Hellenized Muslims, influenced by Averroës, kept Aristotelian philosophy alive and practiced empiricism in astronomical observation and medicine. In Muslim Spain, in 970, a library and a scientific academy were established in Cordova. But with the Christian conquest of Spain, empiricism in Europe declined again until Copernicus.

When we speak of empiricism and its role in the growth of scientific method and the Enlightenment, we must keep in mind the role of discourse and engagement with a community. Scholasticism can be practiced by monks in silence and isolation, but it can never result in scientific breakthroughs. Its only mode of "discovery" is revelation, and we all know how far that's gotten us. Rather, the scientific endeavor proceeds through institutions composed of individuals working communally. Philosophy, at its best, when approached humanistically, works the same way. It is never final, always evolving by the input and fresh ideas of others, through dissent and dialogue.

This is hardly to say that the communal growth of knowledge and wisdom always brings happiness and joy. The history of ideas is fraught with battles, sometimes of gigantic proportions. The French Academy of Sciences and Royal Society took nationalistic sides in the great debate over the origins of calculus, with heavyweight champs Newton and Leibniz "duking it out" over a course of years. The schools of Plato and Aristotle were very publicly at odds. Egos clashed in the discovery of the structure of DNA, and private disputes

roiled over into publications and Nobel Prizes. The debate between Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Dawkins over whether evolution happens gradually or fitfully is legendary. In the end, however, it is clear that none of our truly productive enterprises are conducted in isolation from some community. Each of these clashes and debates have moved us forward a bit.

“Worshippers of the life of the mind must realize that no great work comes through isolation.”

No science is ever final, nor should any philosophy ever be considered complete. Each new age of innovation must be made way for; they grow from the clashes of those that preceded them and are often wrong. In all useful human endeavors, we work our way toward a more accurate picture of the truth, a better working model of the universe. The institutions of peer review and conferences, debate, and pedagogy involve a constant tinkering, a slow, meandering progress with many detours and dead ends along the way. Colleagues and peers, comprising the institutions in which progress is made, prove neces-

sary to prod, correct, and challenge us in the journey toward truth.

Since the end of scholasticism and the advent of empiricism, one recent philosophical trend has threatened the institutional nature of knowledge and learning more than any other. Postmodernism takes a misunderstanding of the nature of relativity in physics and applies it to epistemology in general. It threatened, in its heyday, to resuscitate philosophical solipsism as a respectable method of inquiry. Essentially, it posits that, because all observation involves some individual's context, inseparable from the observation, any agreements over the nature of reality are arbitrary, often political, and bear no necessary relation to the “truth.” Of course, if this were literally the case in the sciences, then the scientific endeavor would be meaningless, nothing but a public pantomime.

Out of the messy chaos that is the human community, from the French salons and English coffeehouses, the royal academies and the *philosophes*, and today's APA and AAAS, has come innovation and progress. The march of history and enlightenment is fueled by dialogue, error, debate, and exchange. The din and dispute, the cooperation and competition, spark the creative march toward ultimate knowledge—never achieving it, always approaching it in fits and starts. So, considering all this, when I finally emerge from these intro-

spective periods of withdrawal, I embrace the mess, the din, the stark reality of the communal nature of progress, and dive into the fray. The real

“It would be a mistake for philosophers, or, indeed, any scholars, to ignore the success of the communitarian nature of science and lapse into solipsism.”

world—the world of experience and interaction—creates a bustle within me of new ideas, new energy, and new hope that, together, we can achieve something. We are, none of us, alone; we are social animals, and the human community together with communities of affiliation are an integral part of our nature. We should heed Bacon's description and work as the many toward the one, lest we become as dead as the scholastics, following blindly the works of our predecessors. **f f**

David Koepsell is the executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism and an associate editor of FREE INQUIRY.

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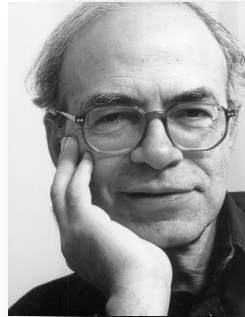


PETER SINGER

A Case for Veganism

Can we defend the things we do to animals? Christians, Jews, and Muslims may appeal to scripture to justify their dominion over animals, but, once we move beyond a religious outlook, we have to face “the animal question” without any prior assumption that animals were created for our benefit or that our use of them has divine sanction. If we are just one species among others that has evolved on this planet, and if the other species include billions of nonhuman animals who can also suffer or, conversely, enjoy their lives, should our interests always count for more than theirs?

Of all the ways in which we affect animals, the one most in need of justification today is raising them for food. Far more animals are affected by this than by any other human activity. In the United States alone, the number of animals raised and killed for food every year is now around ten billion. All of this



is, strictly speaking, unnecessary. In developed countries, where we have a wide choice of foods, no one *needs* to eat meat. Many studies show that we can live as healthfully, or even more healthfully, without it. We can also live well on a vegan diet, consuming no animal products at all. (Vitamin B₁₂ is the only essential nutrient not available from

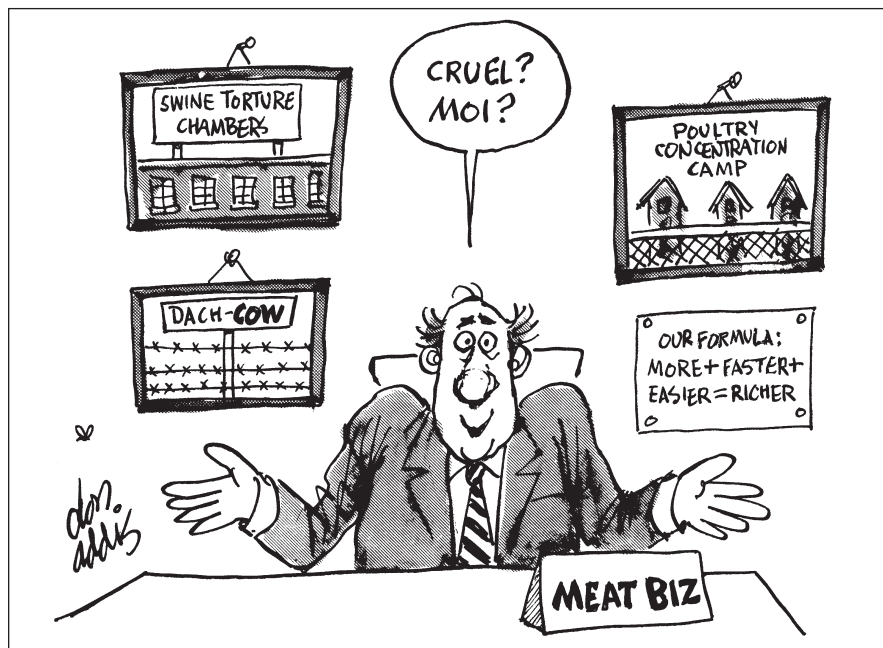
plant foods, and it is easy to take a supplement that can be obtained from vegan sources.)

Ask people to name the main ethical problem concerning eating animals and most will refer to killing. That is an issue, of course, but, at least as far as modern industrial animal production is concerned, there is a more straightforward objection. Even if there were nothing wrong with killing animals because we like the taste of their flesh, we would still be supporting a system of agriculture that inflicts prolonged suffering on animals.

Chickens raised for meat are kept in sheds that hold more than twenty-thousand birds. The level of ammonia in the air from their accumulated droppings stings the eyes and hurts the lungs. Slaughtered at only forty-five days old, their immature bones can hardly bear the weight of their bodies. Some collapse and, unable to reach food or water, soon die. Their fate is irrelevant to the economics of the enterprise as a whole. Catching, transporting, and slaughtering are brutal processes in which the economic incentives all favor speed, and the welfare of the birds plays no role at all.

Laying hens are crammed into wire cages so small that, even if there were just one per cage, she would be unable to stretch her wings. But there are usually at least four hens, often more, per cage. Under such crowded conditions, the more aggressive birds in the cage peck at the weaker hens, who are unable to escape. To prevent this pecking from leading to fatalities, producers sear off all the birds' beaks with a hot blade. A hen's beak is full of nerve tissue—it is her principal means of relating to her environment—but no anesthetic or analgesic is used to relieve the pain.

Pigs may be the most intelligent and sensitive of the animals we commonly eat. In today's factory farms, pregnant sows are kept in crates so narrow that they cannot turn around or even walk more than a step forward or backward. They lie on bare concrete without straw or any other form of bedding. They have no way



to satisfy their instinct to build a nest just before giving birth. The piglets are taken from the sow as soon as possible, so that she can be made pregnant again. But they, too, are kept indoors—on bare concrete—until they are taken to slaughter.

Beef cattle spend the last six months of their lives in feedlots on bare dirt, eating grain that is not suitable for their digestion, fed steroids to make them put on more muscle and antibiotics to keep them alive. They have no shade from the blazing summer sun nor shelter from winter blizzards.

But what, you may ask, is wrong with milk and other dairy products? Don't the cows have a good life grazing in the fields? After all, we don't have to kill them to get milk. But most dairy cows are now kept inside and do not have access to pasture. Like human females, they do not give milk unless they have recently had a baby, and so dairy cows are made pregnant every year. The calf is taken away from its mother just hours after birth so that it will not drink the milk intended for humans. If the calf is male, he may be killed immediately, raised for veal, or perhaps made into hamburger beef. The bond between a cow and her calf is strong, and she will often call for the calf for several days after it is taken away.

In addition to the ethical question of our treatment of animals, there is now a powerful new argument for a vegan diet. Ever since Frances Moore Lappé published *Diet for a Small Planet* in 1971, we have known that modern, industrial animal production is extremely wasteful. Pig farms use six pounds of grain for every pound of boneless meat they produce. For beef cattle in feedlots, the ratio is 13 to 1. Even for chickens—the least-inefficient factory-farmed meat—the ratio is 3 to 1.

Lappé was concerned about the waste of food and the extra pressure on arable land this involves, since we could be eating the grain and soybeans ourselves just as well, using much less land. Now, global warming sharpens the problem. Most Americans think that the best thing they could do to reduce their personal contribution to global warming would be to swap their family car for a fuel-efficient hybrid. In their 2006 article, "Diet, Energy, and Global Warming," Gidon Eshel and Pamela Martin, re-

searchers at the University of Chicago, calculate that, while this would indeed lead to a reduction in emissions of about one ton of carbon dioxide per driver, switching from the typical U.S. diet to a vegan diet would save the equivalent of almost one and a half tons of carbon dioxide per person. Vegans are therefore doing significantly less damage to our climate than those who eat animal products.

Is there an ethical way of eating animal products? It is possible to obtain meat, eggs, and dairy products from animals who have been treated less cruelly and allowed to eat grass rather than grain or soy. Limiting one's consumption of animal products to these sources also avoids some of the greenhouse-gas emissions, although cows fed on grass

still emit substantial amounts of methane, a particularly potent contributor to global warming. So *if* there is no serious ethical objection to killing animals so long as they have had good lives, then being selective about the animal products you eat could provide an ethically defensible diet. It requires care, however. "Organic," for instance, says little about animal welfare, and hens not kept in cages may still be crowded into a large shed. Going vegan is a simpler choice that sets a clear-cut example for others to follow. **ff**

Peter Singer is a professor of bioethics at Princeton University and the author, with Jim Mason, of The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter.

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NAT HENTOFF

Adrift in the Information Revolution

The U.S. Census Bureau's Statistical Abstract of the United States forecasts [that] adults and teens will spend 3,518 hours—that's nearly five months—consuming media in some form in 2007. . . . By far, television takes up more time than any other medium, with 1,555 hours per person expected. . . .

—*New York Post*,
December 15, 2006

Newspapers, fearful of looming obsolescence while other media—television obviously among them—draw readers away, are hurriedly moving onto the Internet. Writing about the treadmill of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, *New York Times* Public Editor Byron Calame (November 19) wonders when reporters and editors in his shop will have time to reflect amid the swift currents of

breaking news as they gather and write stories for the print edition while also updating them on the Web. He writes:

Expecting them to quickly crank out and keep updating a bare-bones version for the Web could mean that a



final article of traditional *Times* quality will be less than it could have been.

Also increasingly accelerating in many newspapers is a concentrated focus on local news in the belief that, through television and the Internet, readers already are conversant with national and international news.

At the Fort Myers, Florida, *News-Press*—as reported in *The Washington Post* last December 4—there is “a constantly updated stream of intensely local, fresh Web news [on the paper’s Web site], regardless of its traditional news value . . . to build online and newspaper readership,” says Managing Editor Mackenzie Warren. “Whatever you spend your time and money doing is news.”

Alarmed, *Editor & Publisher*, the industry’s leading trade magazine, headlined a December 6 editorial: “Newspapers must not abandon reporting on global issues in their rush to follow the mantra of local, local, local.” The editorial also sadly noted that “reporting of international events is jettisoned to make room for the Wednesday lunch menu at Grover Cleveland Junior High.”

There is also a quickening movement to make newspapers interactive with their readers through their Web sites—where people will report as much news as they’re getting. This further “democratization” of information already is populating the Internet with blogs of opinion, to which are attached tendrils of equally freewheeling views of readers of the blogs. Unavailable, of course, is any fact-checking of this instant information.

A penetrating and chilling commentary on our ceaseless access to multiple media appeared in the December 20 *Washington Times* in a piece by its editorial-page editor, Tony Blankley. (By way of full disclosure, a weekly syndicated national column I write for United Media appears every Monday on the op-ed page of that conservative newspaper. I often vigorously disagree with the paper’s editorials in that column, and my dissents have never been curbed.)



Since the invention of movable type in the fifteenth century, Tony Blankley writes, “we have gone from [previous] ignorance of the events of the world . . . to today’s condition of confusion and ignorance due to an unending glut of information. . . . As snippets of news flash past our consciousness at a rate and volume greater than our capacity to absorb, we don’t know what to know and what to ignore. And of the information we decide to notice and absorb, there are so many versions of it that we don’t know what is true and what is false and distorted.”

“. . . most users of the Internet click on the sites of information with the ideological tilts of which they approve. Accordingly, there is limited challenge to re-examine one’s own biases and long-established mindsets.”

With regard to the unprecedented diversity of news and views afforded to our ever-advancing technology, it has become clear that most users of the Internet click on the sites of information with the ideological tilts of which they approve. Accordingly, there is limited challenge to reexamine one’s own biases and long-established mindsets.

Brian Williams, NBC-TV’s evening news anchor, is widely self-informed—as I discovered when I was interviewed by him—and he told of his concern about the ceaseless, unfiltered flow of “communication” in an essay in *Time* magazine: “The danger is that we miss the next great book or the next great idea, or that we will fail to meet the next great challenge . . . because we are too busy cele-

brating ourselves and listening to the same tune we already know by heart.”

A deeper danger in this constitutional republic is sounded by Tony Blankley: “Rule by the people itself is threatened if the people are unable to gain a plausible grip on reality. The threat to democracy in the future will be less from above than from our mind-numbed selves.”

An index of the growing degree of that numbness among a considerable number of the citizenry is an October 20–22 CNN poll last year that showed that “most Americans do not believe the Bush administration has gone too far in restricting civil liberties in the war on terror. Asked whether Bush has more power than any other U.S. president, 65 percent of the poll respondents said no. Thirty-three percent said yes. Of those who said yes, [only] a quarter said that was bad for the country.”



Actually, since shortly after September 11, 2001, the president has enthusiastically accepted the counsel of a cadre of lawyers at the Defense and Justice Departments who tell him that in this war for the survival of our values and very lives against insatiably lethal terrorists, he must exercise “unitary executive” powers unrestrained by either Congress or the courts.

The Supreme Court, in two decisions—*Rasul v. Bush* (2004) and *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* (2006)—has tried to disabuse him of that unconstitutional conclusion, but the president is unimpressed. Late last year, a Republican-controlled Congress essentially overruled the Supreme Court—in the Military Commission Act of 2006—by allowing him to continue ignoring the due-process rights of our “detainees” at Guantanamo and elsewhere while continuing the special, lawless powers he has given the Central Intelligence Agency since 2002 to run secret prisons around the world and also to conduct “renditions” of terror suspects to countries known for torturing prisoners, including those sent them by the CIA.

The president has also, among other exercises of his extensive and arbitrary powers, conducted warrantless spying on Americans by the National Security Agency [moderated only after this article was written—Eds.]; and his administration is now working to chill a disrespectful (and, he implies, disloyal) press by invoking the Espionage Act of 1917.

The citizenry, omnivorously absorbed in all the media, is largely undisturbed by these radical revisions of the Constitution. There are dissenters; and with the Democrats in control of Congress again, there will be investigations and hearings into these incursions into our liberties by the “unitary executive.” But whether any revelations will un-numb large sections of the citizenry is questionable.

Jonathan Turley, a constitutional law professor at George Washington University, a columnist, and an active litigator in national-security cases, said in an October 18 MSNBC interview: “People clearly don’t realize what a fundamental change it is about who we are as a country. . . . We are strangely silent in this national yawn as our rights evaporate.”

This image is not entirely accurate. There is not a national yawn but rather a national entertainment with the endless diversions of the multimedia. As Turley says: during the congressional debate and then the passage of the Military Commission Act of 2006—one of the most dangerous threats to our liberties in our history—most people were tuned in to *Dancing with the Stars*.  

Nat Hentoff is a regular columnist for The Village Voice and The Washington Times, a United Media syndicated columnist, and the author of Living the Bill of Rights (University of California Press, 1999) and The War on the Bill of Rights and the Gathering Resistance (Seven Stories Press, 2004)

Contest Closed

We are no longer accepting submissions in response to columnist Sam Harris’s call (*FI*, February/March 2007, p. 21) for rejoinders to arguments against atheism. Thanks to all those who replied. A panel is being convened to judge the entries, and the winners will be notified later this spring.

—THE EDITORS

Science, Education, and the Common Good

Michael Ben-Chaim & Barry A. Kosmin

Calls to redress alarming inadequacies in science education appear regularly, most recently following the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress report on urban school districts (November 15, 2006). The report showed that students in urban schools lagged badly in scientific literacy. What is missing from the conventional response is a broader perspective on science education and its relationship to the status of science in contemporary culture.

The inadequacies of science education in our schools and the low level of scientific literacy among the American population are often blamed on deficiencies

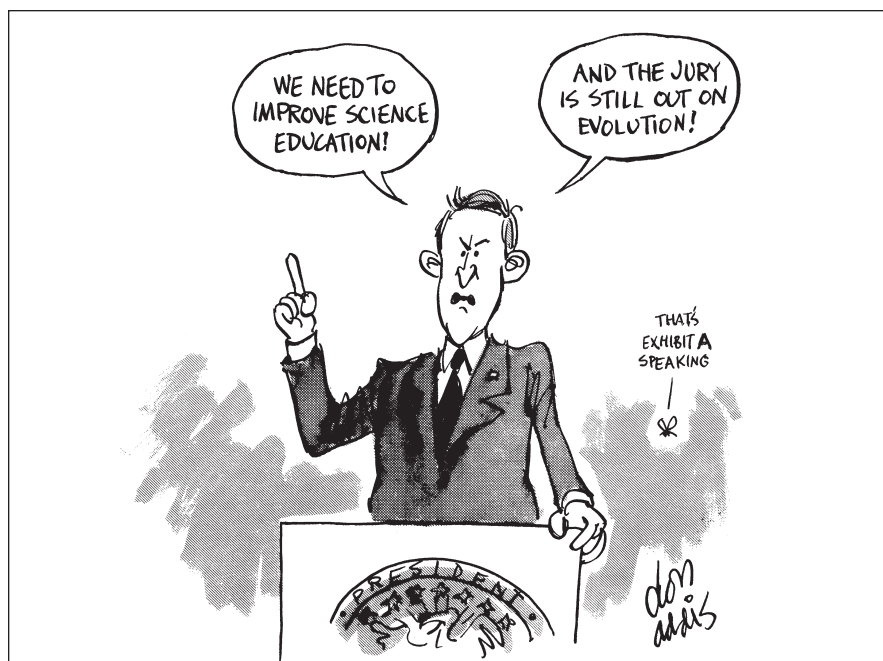
in the public-school system. However, the behavior of both students and teachers seems to reflect widely held, ambivalent, and even confused attitudes toward the progress of science and its benefits for society as a whole.

The prevalence of such attitudes at the very pinnacle of the U.S. government indicates their wide circulation. President Bush often highlights his endeavor to reinvigorate the American dream of education for all under the banner “No Child Left Behind.” Yet, the president has failed to send the public a clear message of trust in the universal value of a secular science and its concomitant of free inquiry. Rather, he has

suggested that Americans must trust first and foremost in their religious beliefs and then evaluate the progress of science in areas such as stem cell research in light of their personal religious commitments.

Historically, the American dream of education and progress for all has been predicated on the notion that the form of education that can truly empower individuals is scientific in both spirit and principle. Now, if the president of the United States does not fully trust the progress of science, it could be expected that large sections of the American public also do not genuinely believe that science education is crucial to the intellectual growth of American children.

“ . . . if the president of the United States does not fully trust the progress of science, it could be expected that large sections of the American public also do not genuinely believe that science education is crucial to the intellectual growth of American children.”



The American dream of harnessing scientific progress to the betterment of each and every citizen arose in the heyday of the Progressive era in the early twentieth century. It was originally propagated by a coalition comprising a new breed of industrialists, public servants, and academicians, who believed that science and its universal method of knowledge acquisition could unify the nation and generate economic and social progress. This vision was predicated on the idea that secular science was,

and should be, value-neutral and thoroughly indifferent to each component of the amalgam of distinctive identities and beliefs that make up the American people. The Progressives professed that this indifference on the part of science

“Most Americans still believe that science, technology, and the market are reliable means of distributing material affluence in society. Nevertheless, too many citizens have, unfortunately, discovered at school that scientific work is not a model they wish to embrace.”

was basic to its credibility and that the neutrality of empirical science was its strength.

The proclaimed indifference of science to belief is now being reciprocated. Teachers fail to relate factual knowledge adequately to the distinctive experiences and values of an increasingly ethnically and religiously diverse body of students. As a result, science in the classroom often fails to inspire students. Some students feel alienated, given the pressure of covering the basics of modern science. In addition, some parents believe that the integrity of their family's religious beliefs is undermined by the forces of scientific indifference. This hostility is expressed in their children's attitude toward science in the classroom. In addition, there is even a fashionable relativist outlook that belittles the achievements of science. Moreover, in an age when technology is increasingly user-friendly, one can easily be indifferent, alienated, or hostile to science yet at the same time continue to enjoy the benefits of science-based, high-tech industry.

This reciprocation of indifference between the scientific community and much of the general public has gradually eroded the status of science as a common good. Most Americans still believe that science, technology, and the market are reliable means of distributing material affluence in society. Nevertheless, too many citizens have, unfortunately, discovered at school that scientific work is not a model they wish to embrace. As a result, the traditional model of science education appears more elusive than ever. Though parents recognize that their children's futures depends on a good education, the swell of scientific illiteracy prevents these parents from assessing with confidence and clarity precisely what a “good education” means. And, despite the public's general expectation that science will progress, more and more individuals do not seek personal engagement in this adventure. In this respect, the dream of science for all has become a cliché rather than a source of personal inspiration.


The first step in reversing this unfortunate trend is recognizing the reality of pluralism. Diversity of personal identities and beliefs in American society is inevitable and indelible. For this reason, secular traditions—such as modern science—which are not subject to the authority of any particular creed or set of beliefs, are vital. These traditions generate a secular living space that enables individuals to transcend their distinctive identity and beliefs. This allows them to reach out and learn from others, thereby creating with others common assets that they could not conceive of on their own. In a culturally heterogeneous society, the cultivation of secular common assets is in the best interest of everybody, including those who hold dearly to their distinctive identities.

The second step requires a change of outlook among scientists and educators. They must recognize that deficiencies in science education are the effect, rather than the cause, of the deteriorating status of science in society. Science in contemporary society must be a collective endeavor aimed at achieving a shared understanding of our world. For this reason, it must be much more than factual knowledge and ought to be taught and learned as such. In this respect, the notion that scientific progress is value-neutral because it is confined to the expan-

sion of knowledge is misleading in theory and counterproductive in practice.

“Diversity of personal identities and beliefs in American society is inevitable and indelible. For this reason, secular traditions—such as modern science—which are not subject to the authority of any particular creed or set of beliefs, are vital.”

Research scientists and educators ought to assume a leadership role that demonstrates, in theory and practice, that science is a model of human growth and development. This model should be applied in the classroom to address the values, concerns, and life experiences of individual students. Students will then come to recognize that science offers abstract knowledge as well as a mode of understanding their place in the world. It is hoped that they will be more likely to assume more active roles in the classroom. The result will be improved scientific literacy in society.

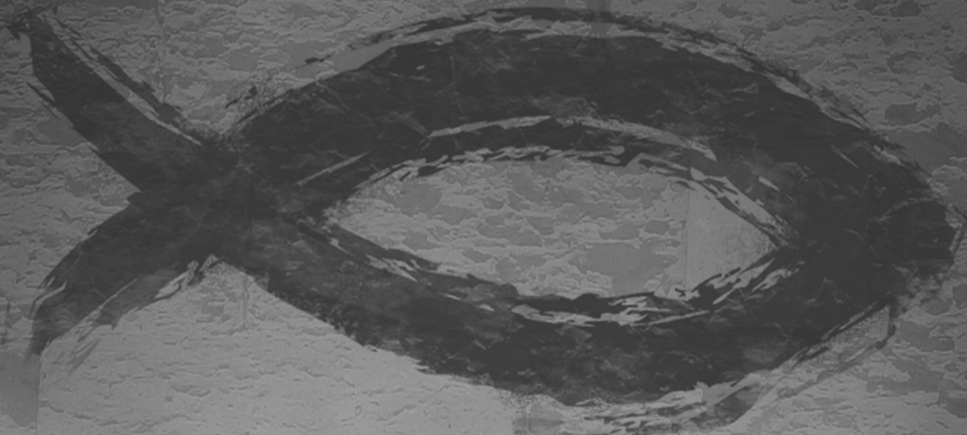
Needless to say, science as a model of human growth and development will never be immune to public debate. However, if the suggested steps are adopted, then the debate about science, education, and the common good could transcend the lamentable mood of ambivalence and confusion that we have currently. 

Michael Ben-Chaim is a fellow of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, and Barry A. Kosmin is the Institute's director and a research professor in the Public Policy and Law Program at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

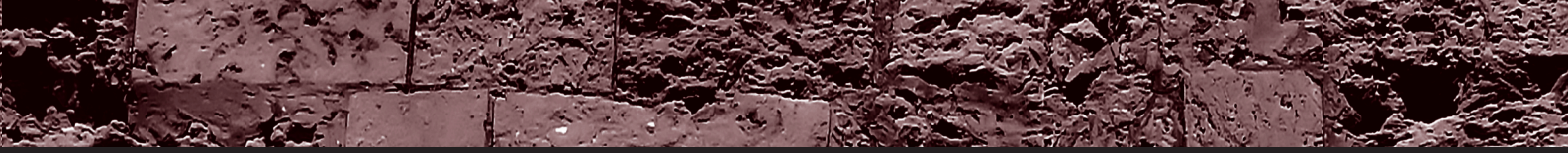
WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

The Rise of Primitive Christianity, 30–70 C.E.

Gerd Lüdemann



“The times they are a-changin’”—and so are modern perceptions of Christian origins. Taking as their standards the Gospels and Acts, traditionalists long overlooked the disciples’ precipitate flight to Galilee after Jesus’ execution, preferring to focus on the loyal women at the empty tomb and the miraculous infusion of spiritual ecstasy at Pentecost. Today, however, many scholars see the empty tomb as special pleading, and the tongues of fire in Jerusalem as a mythic dramatization of convictions that gradually arose in Galilee before the disciples returned to the Holy City with their proclamation of a



Risen Lord. In spite of Luke’s idealized portrait of a unified movement and a single doctrine spreading from Jerusalem to Rome—and thence to all the world—scholars now recognize multiple traditions dating from as early as the first decade after Jesus’ death. In addition to the Aramaic Jewish community in Jerusalem, there were “churches” of Hellenistic Jews in Damascus and Antioch whose witnessing turned Paul from persecutor to propagator. Thus evolved Pauline Christianity, and from it the primarily Gentile traditions we find in Mark and Luke. A few scholars go so far as to see separate beginnings in groups represented by such texts as the Didache, the Gospels of Thomas and Mary, the Sayings Source (Q), and a number of Gnostic texts. To be sure, some of these arose after 70 C.E., but the multiformity of early Christianity is now beyond question; and the mythic tales of a single Christian origin have given way to historical accounts based on objective evidence and critical review.

When Jesus was crucified one Friday in the spring of (about) 30 C.E. after being arrested by the Roman military, the male disciples who had accompanied him to Jerusalem fled in fear back to their native Galilee. Several female members of his entourage were more tenacious, among them a woman named Mary from the Galilean fishing village of Magdala.

It is clear that Rome had ample reason for executing Jesus: troublemakers—especially any seeming to have royal pretensions—must be summarily removed. And although Jesus rejected the radical theocratic program of such insurgents as Judas the Galilean, his ethical, social, and economic radicalism was based on a similar message of God’s in breaking kingdom and exclusive rule. To be sure, Jesus’ political statements are rare, and they never explicitly contrapose God and the emperor, but several of his symbolic actions were at least critical of contemporary political realities. Think only of his assignment of twelve fishermen to rule over Israel, the contrast between his reportedly humble approach to Jerusalem and the show of pomp and power typical of the Roman governor’s entry, or his highly ambivalent comment on a Roman coin and the imperial power it represented. The clear subtext of these performances was a stark ultimatum: God or the emperor. If God indeed rules, any apportionment of authority must be, at best, derivative and provisional.

Moreover, Jesus’s violent disruption of temple business at Passover surely alarmed the Jerusalem priesthood: it could well have been seen (or even intended) as a symbolic overthrow of the temple. Its aim was neither reform nor the prevention of further pollution but rather seemed to echo his call for a completely new temple granted by God. Together with reports of messianic pretensions that included a claim to be the long-awaited Son of Man, these perceived threats gave the

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Jerusalem priesthood ample reason to urge action against a common enemy.

The arrest of Jesus and his death—without benefit of a trial—occurred on a single day. Since the next day was the Sabbath, the problem of disposing of the body arose. Jewish law and custom forbade leaving a corpse on the cross overnight, but even more offensive to Jewish sensibilities would be its remaining there on a Sabbath. The Roman authorities apparently allowed Jesus’s body to be taken down from the cross; thereupon either Jewish leaders entrusted its entombment to Joseph of Arimathea or persons unknown buried or

“... mythic tales of a single Christian origin have given way to historical accounts based on objective evidence and critical review.”

otherwise got rid of the corpse. Both the Roman and Jewish officials assumed that this would be the end of the matter.

Jesus’s thoughts and feelings in his last hours are of course unknown. Because none of his followers were present, the words attributed to him from his arrest until his death are certainly creations of the Christian community. Clearly, the reports we have differ widely and reflect the agendas of several evangelists. Luke, for example, goes so far as to portray Jesus promising the criminal on his right a place with him in paradise that very day, then asking God to forgive his enemies, and finally commending his own spirit into his Father’s hands. These motifs of Jesus’s glory and sovereignty run like a scarlet thread throughout Luke’s narrative in Acts.

THE DISCIPLES OVERCOME THE DISASTER OF GOOD FRIDAY

For Jesus’s disciples, his death was so severe a shock that it demanded a process of reconceptualization—one that began in Galilee and was marked by visionary experiences. Not long after Good Friday, Peter had a visual and auditory experience of Jesus’s presence that initiated an extraordinary chain reaction. In Galilee, Peter instituted (or reconstituted) the circle of the twelve, presumably modeled on the fellowship founded by Jesus. It may also have reflected a shared conviction that the twelve tribes of Israel would symbolically herald the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. After all, they had followed Jesus to Jerusalem yearning for, and perhaps half expecting, the advent of that “kingdom,” an inchoate notion derived from the message and example of their master. At first, Jesus’s death had destroyed their earlier hope, but repetitions of Peter’s experience rekindled and at last surpassed

it. The kingdom of God had begun, though not in the way the disciples had expected.

Jesus's postmortem appearances—both to Peter, who repudiated and later deserted him and to the other disciples who had earlier fled—were surely taken to signify forgiveness, and naturally the content of these experiences was passed on to others. No doubt, the reports emphasized that, far from abandoning Jesus, God had taken him to heaven. They may even have suggested—perhaps speculatively at first—that Jesus would soon be reappearing from heaven as the Son of Man. That scenario emboldened his followers to embark on a tremendous new venture: the women and men who had at-

“The ever-increasing distance between Judaism and what only later was termed ‘Christianity’ stemmed in large measure from Paul’s view of Jesus’ divinity on the basis of his resurrection and the resulting conviction that God’s action alone had conferred that status upon him.”

tached themselves to Jesus would return to Jerusalem to continue the work their master had left unfinished. Once again (and perhaps it would be God's last offer), they would call for a change of heart and mind. These first visions reported by Peter and the twelve proved so infectious that we are told of another appearance, this time to more than five hundred people at once. At this point, surely, any non-ecstatic interpretation comes to grief.

The dynamic power of such a beginning is not to be underestimated. Jesus's own brothers were sufficiently swept up in the excitement that James—who had so little sympathy for Jesus's cause that he likely participated in the reported attempt to have his “crazy” brother put away (Mark 3:21)—is said to have received an individual vision. In addition to these personal visionary encounters with the “Risen One,” three powerful historical elements defined and galvanized the early community's faith: (1) the act of breaking bread together recaptured, and thus restored, the presence of the master who had been so cruelly killed; (2) recalling his words and works set him again in their midst; and (3) the messianic promises of Scripture, especially the familiar Psalter hymns, became expressions of the present reality of the exalted Son of Man.

THE RISE OF THE HELLENIST FACTION AND ITS EXPULSION FROM JERUSALEM

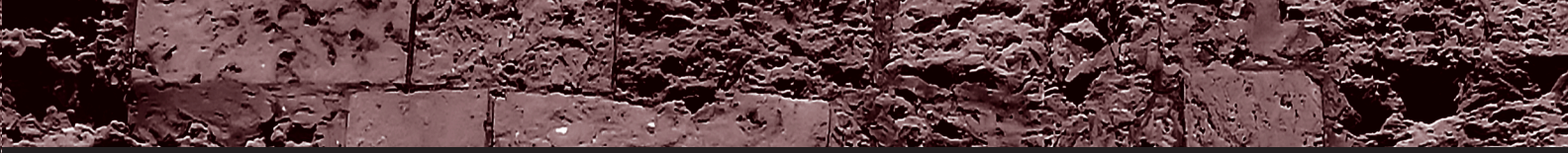
Even at this earliest stage, the movement took on new dimensions when Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem became part of it—perhaps in the aftermath of a reported ecstatic experience of more than five hundred brothers at one time at the feast of the Pentecost. This led to a new spiritual interpretation of the words of Jesus and an imminent expectation that undermined their prior allegiance to the Torah and temple cult. The hostile reaction of the temple priests was inevitable, and when, in the resulting altercation, a charismatic Hellenist leader was killed, the group fled Jerusalem and began to spread their message about Jesus—which called for the inclusion of Gentiles—to cities like Damascus, Antioch, and Caesarea. As Luke indicates, they were the first to transfer primitive Christianity to the cities of the empire and to change the new faith from a backwoods Galilean sect into a successful city religion.

THE ITINERANT MISSIONARIES AND THE Q COMMUNITY

Another group of Jesus's followers—itinerant activists ignored by the book of Acts—remained in the rural areas where Jesus's ethical radicalism found a welcome home, for the economic dimension of his radical message offered a clear choice between God and Rome's confiscatory policies. His deprecation of the wealthy is harsh to the point of exaggeration. While the homeless might easily bid farewell to kith and kin and aspire to the spiritual exaltation of life without employment, possessions, or even means of defense, the wealthy can find salvation only by renouncing their possessions—a task much harder for the “haves” than the “have-nots.” Yet, while a recurrent theme of asceticism marks earliest Christianity as a movement recruited from among the dispossessed and having a strongly countercultural ethos, Jesus's exalted and universal ethic was inherent from the outset. Thus, primitive Christianity shows a dual spirit: while seeking to exit or overthrow a corrupt society, the faithful strove to establish the highest ethical principles.

The ethical stance of early Christianity, combining political resistance and moral rebuke, shows that ethical radicalism may have been reborn in political struggle as early as the first generation after Jesus's death. Indeed, the sayings collection known as Q (the probable source for many of the sayings of Jesus in Matthew and Luke) challenges the radical itinerant ethos. At three points, it departs from a formulaic presentation of Jesus's words to narrate his temptation, his healing of a centurion's servant, and his cure of a blind and mute demoniac. Together with Jesus's explanatory remarks about the prince of demons, these seem, to a number of scholars, to reflect later editing that in turn indicates a changed social context.

The mountaintop climax of the temptation story could well allude to Caligula's attempt in 39/40 C.E. to place his own statue in the temple, for the resulting crisis likely obliged the fledgling movement both to reassess its radical ethic and to compile a written collection of its traditions. The story of the centurion whose trust amazed Jesus would then offset the antiauthoritarian myth by portraying a ranking representative of the empire



who acknowledged Jesus's authority and won his respect. In this context, the saying about Beelzebul's divided kingdom becomes a metaphor for the imperial conflict between Satan and God and the exorcism a vivid example of Jesus's dominion over the world. Where Jesus confronted those in power with symbolic deeds, the Q editor is formulating the conscience of the early movement by satirizing Roman imperial power as the ineffective posturing of Satan.

PAUL, A PERSECUTOR OF THE CHURCH, BECOMES A MISSIONARY OF THE GOSPEL

Paul of Tarsus stands among the most influential figures in the Christian West. At once a Jew, a Roman, and a Christian, he saw himself as an apostle called personally by the risen Jesus to take the Gospel to the Gentile world. Born about the same time as Jesus, a few hundred miles north of his master's native Galilee, Paul was a Diaspora Jew who had inherited Roman citizenship from his father and therefore belonged to both the Jewish and the Greco-Roman worlds. Despite Jewish restrictions on contact with Greeks, he did receive a basic education, mediated through Hellenistic Judaism that included instruction in the Greek language and the study of rhetoric. Still, deeply imbued elements of his ancestral culture remained and appeared in his letters many years later. To be sure, familiarity with the theater, contests in the arena, and philosophical disputations in the marketplace showed him the breadth and beauty of the Hellenistic world and its innately rational temper; but his ancestral religion offered both a sense of belonging and the security of exclusiveness. Far from being an average follower of his ancestral faith, he knew much of the Jewish Scripture in Greek and accepted the God who had chosen Israel and prescribed rules for it to live by. No wonder Paul left his ancestral home for Jerusalem; he wanted to pursue his studies at the center of the world, where his heavenly Father's temple stood and where daily sacrifice was offered for the sins of his people. Here, the young zealot would complete his education as a Pharisee; here, he would follow his ordained career as a scholar.

But as the result of a zeal that bordered on fanaticism, things turned out otherwise. In Damascus, Paul encountered a group of Greek-speaking Jews who identified themselves with a crucified Galilean named Jesus and went so far as to proclaim him Messiah. Not only that, they claimed that he had been elevated by God and this, too, publicized his criticisms of the law. Then, as if announcing a crucified criminal as Messiah were not enough, they called for changes in Jewish practice! It was too much for Paul. The elect of Israel had often felt driven to glorify God in their zeal for the ancestral law, and Paul forcibly attempted to squelch this new movement. Others saw no reason for draconian intervention, but the young zealot saw it as a threat. The rapid growth of this largely diasporic sect was to prove him right. To have imagined that he was to play a key role in the dissemination of a movement that would soon be a deadly threat to Jews would have taken his breath away.

But in the course of his furious persecution in Damascus, the very one whose followers he was harassing appeared to Paul in a vision. Personally chastised by the risen Lord, Paul

had no choice: it was imperative to enter into his service, for surely this was the Son of God, and all that his followers had said of him was true. The persecutor must immediately join the community he had been persecuting. Of course, the heavenly vision rendered him blind—for all this took place at a deeply emotional level—but one of his new brothers in the faith, Ananias, healed Paul in the name of Jesus, welcomed him, and instructed him in the new faith of which he had only a persecutor's rudimentary knowledge.

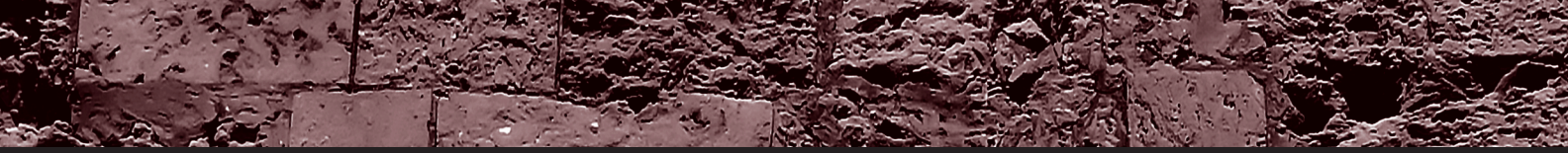
“When Paul’s work was done, the downfall of the vibrant, ancient culture that had grown up out of Hellenism was complete.”

PAUL DISCOVERS HIS DISTINCTIVE ROLE IN THE DRAMA OF SALVATION

With time to reflect on Jesus's appearance and its meaning, Paul recalled the passages in Scripture that foretold a future Messiah. But how could he reconcile these with the fact that the leader of these Christians had died on the cross? None of the prophecies had envisioned a suffering Messiah, but the heavenly Lord who had accosted him was unmistakably the crucified Jesus. The scripturally sophisticated ex-Pharisee found a ready answer: in a bold leap of thought, he combined the Jewish ideal of the Messiah with the trope of the “suffering servant” from the book of Isaiah—a conflation made easier by the fact that Jesus's suffering had marked only a brief transition to his heavenly glory. The like must be true for all Christians: they would all suffer tribulation before the great day.

In Scripture, Paul also discovered his own distinctive role in the heavenly drama. He eagerly sensed a new significance in passages from Isaiah and Jeremiah, in which the prophets assert that God himself had ordained them in their mothers' wombs; perhaps he, too, like those great prophets of the past, had been specially called to be an apostolic preacher. The tremendous self-confidence that now filled Paul exceeded even that of his pre-Christian period—a development all the more remarkable when one considers that this enthusiast from Tarsus never personally knew Jesus of Nazareth.

But how could Paul claim authority directly from the risen Lord without learning from the followers he had so recently persecuted something of their leader's life and teaching? How could one visionary experience place him on the same footing as the personal followers of Jesus? His strategy was to appropriate the formula that he must have learned from either the Damascus or the Antioch community as part of the institution of the Lord's Supper: “I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you. . . .” He similarly accounted for everything else that he learned—or wished to claim he had learned—



about Jesus. The authority of the Lord, who had personally commissioned his apostle, automatically hallowed Paul's words. Believing himself in direct contact with the Lord, Paul took his deepest convictions to be revelations—and he followed them without hesitation.

While heaven was almost always an open book to Paul, an angel of Satan could also castigate him if the Lord so willed or if his supply of revelations went to his head. On the other hand, he was sufficiently sure of himself to invoke the power of Satan when preserving the community from uncleanness and saving a sinner's soul by requiring condemnation to death. Paul also saw the spirit of Satan at work when rival apostles caused dissension in the communities he founded. Still, Satan and his angels functioned only as predetermined by God and never gained power over Paul and his communities. They could not thwart the purpose of God, who had sent his Son into the world to save men and women from sin. As a self-proclaimed agent of God and the Lord Jesus, Paul was bound up in this cosmic drama of redemption. The key point was that salvation would, and should, include Gentiles: they were to belong to the church of Jesus Christ on the same footing as the Jews who believed in Jesus. Naturally, such a view was repugnant to many Jewish Christians.

THE NEW EXPERIENCE DEVELOPS IN PAUL AND AMONG OTHER CHRISTIANS

From the beginning, Paul had almost intoxicatingly experienced the unity of the church made up of Jews and Gentiles. We see this first in a passage from Galatians (3:26–28) in which he quotes the liturgy for the baptism of converts: “There is neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor free, but all are one in Jesus Christ.” In this formula, which was repeated time and again in worship, Israel's carefully erected boundaries were demolished. It also appears in his jubilant cry in 2 Corinthians (5:17–18): “If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this [is] from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ.”

This new experience called for rites to keep it alive. Paul knew the two chief ones—baptism and the Eucharist—from the congregation he formerly persecuted. That they were also the major rituals of other developing communities we learn from the Gospel of Mark, whose anonymous author, a younger contemporary of Paul, frames his Gospel with accounts of Jesus's baptism (Mark 1:9–11) and his institution of the Eucharist (Mark 14:22–25). This is an all but certain indication that the evangelist is consciously involved in the narrative creation of a new community of faith that includes both Jews and Gentiles. In Mark's account (written about 70 C.E.) Jesus takes his message to the Gentile areas of Galilee, his fame precedes him on a trip to Syro-Phoenicia, and he repeatedly nullifies the purity and dietary codes that had long distinguished Jews from Gentiles. Mark also invokes the revered Isaiah to put into Jesus's mouth the assurance that God's house must be open to all peoples. What amounts to an open-door policy for Gentiles cannot be an unintended feature of this earliest Gospel.

Luke's account in Acts (which may have been written as much as five decades later) tells a different story: Jewish rejection of the new message triggered the Gentile mission. But it probably worked the other way around, with erosion of Jewish traditions and practices facilitating the conversion of Gentiles and provoking Jewish outrage. Be that as it may, Mark and Luke agree in picturing an ever-widening gap between Christianity and its Jewish roots.

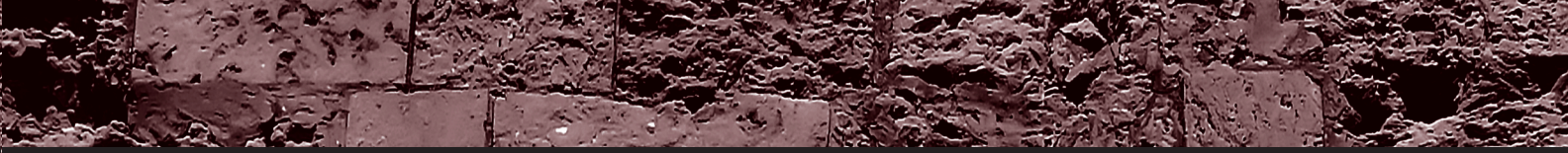
THE ESTRANGEMENT OF PAULINE CHRISTIANITY FROM JUDAISM: REASONS AND RESULTS

Appearances of the risen Lord to early Christians were experiences not of the senses but of the “spirit,” and their spiritual hopes envisioned an even greater event—the return of Jesus on the clouds of heaven, attended by the long-anticipated establishment of God's reign. These excited speculations presented Paul with a problem. In such a supercharged atmosphere, how would he impress on Jesus's personal followers the importance and validity of his own ecstatic experiences and thus persuade them that his apostleship and authority were equal to theirs? How could his interpretation of Jesus's life and teaching be made paradigmatic?

Paul's unsteady relationship with the Jerusalem community clearly indicates the existing stresses. An initial two-week visit some three years after his vision of Christ enabled Paul to make cautious contact with Cephas (Peter), Jesus's first disciple and present leader of the fellowship. The Gentile mission, the personhood of Jesus of Nazareth, and the nature of the Easter events were already prickly issues. Paul was gratified by this meeting and especially by the validation of his preaching activity that shortly followed. Important events soon came thick and fast. Not only did Paul's Gentile mission prove extraordinarily successful, but Jewish-Christian communities also sprang up in Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea, Sidon, and elsewhere. The “Holy Spirit,” imagined as a mysterious and miraculous being, found widespread acceptance and favor, first of all in Syria and then in the Pauline communities in Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia. A movement had been born, called to life by a man who, never having known the earthly Jesus, was all the more in contact with the heavenly counterpart.

The situation was something like a gigantic closed vessel of hot water. The growing number of disciples who invoked the risen Christ had brought Judaism to its boiling point, and the water could no longer be contained. The container burst; the water poured out, and, still steaming, found different ways into somewhat calmer channels. In short, numerous new communities that embraced both Jews and Gentiles sprang into being only to generate later conflicts—for strict Jewish Christians were scandalized by nonobservant activity in the mixed communities and attempted to outlaw it. They did not so much mind what Gentile Christians did, but they were determined that ecumenism should not erode their own unique identity and practice.

A demand for strict segregation of the Jewish Christians from their pagan brothers was not long in coming. In Paul's presence, delegates from Jerusalem fomented a bitter dispute over purity concerns in the mixed community of Antioch and



thereby threatened all that he had achieved. And so it was that, fourteen years after the first visitation, Paul received a revelation from his heavenly Lord to return to Jerusalem. Proud and unbowed, he took with him Titus, an uncircumcised Greek, to establish a precedent. It is no coincidence that Paul's former mission partner Barnabas was also a party to the discussion, but so, too, were those strict Jewish Christians who, as Paul put it, had crept into the (mixed) community and provoked a bitter dispute. Initially, this was completely different from the first visit, for besides Cephas, John now had a voice, and Jesus's biological brother James led the triumvirate. It is indicative of the changing alignment of forces that two of the original disciples were now subordinate to one who had been—at the very least—skeptical of Jesus's ministry.

After no doubt vigorous debate, it was agreed that the Jerusalem church was to spread the Good News to the Jews, and Paul and Barnabas would spread it to the Gentiles. Like many treaties, it was a kind of elastic statement that allowed both parties to read their own understandings into it; besides, the situation was very different for Jews living in Palestine than for those in the Diaspora. Most important to Paul was reaching an agreement, for that answered Paul's primary concern: namely, securing the unity of the church.

But the compromise failed to answer the burning problem of how people in mixed communities would live together. Far from *ruling out* a fairly strict segregation of Jewish and Gentile Christians, the agreement was about conditions for separation. Still, despite all the problems of the "formula of union," all agreed on a collection of funds to aid the Jerusalem community—a project that, ironically, would prove an acid test for the relationship between the Gentile-Christian and the Jewish-Christian churches.

Barnabas was to bring funds from the church of Antioch, and Paul, from the churches in Greece and Galatia that he had founded as early as the late 30s. This would enable Paul to hold the Jerusalem leaders to their agreement (thereby serving as an instrument in church politics) and at the same time would confirm that his apostolate to the Gentiles was based on the unity of the church made up of Jews and Gentiles. For without this unity, he believed, his apostolate to the Gentiles was null and void.

Besides, Paul had already envisaged a mission in Spain in order to conquer the last part of the known world for his Lord. This was a matter of some urgency, for the Lord's coming was near. But, since the agreement had to be safeguarded, Paul first undertook a journey among his communities to secure the collection and solidify the bond between his churches and those in Jerusalem. On the first day of every week, he instructed, the members of each community were to put something aside in order to guarantee a handsome sum when Paul traveled through to receive funds that he would deliver to the delegation that would take them to Jerusalem. Of course, the journey served more than financial and political ends. When the occasion arose, as it did in Ephesus, Paul founded new communities of believers. And, of course, existing communities needed his personal advice and exhortation, or strengthening by delegates like Titus or Timothy.

Then disaster struck. Ultraconservatives from Jerusalem began to invade Paul's communities and threatened to destroy all that he had laboriously built up and steadfastly defended. The traditionalist "false brethren" he had defeated in Jerusalem now attacked him in his own churches. They challenged his apostolic authority and called for closer observance of the law, thus driving a wedge between Paul and Jerusalem. Thus, the battle for the collection became the battle for the unity of the church as well. To make sure that the collection would be received in Jerusalem, Paul changed his plans and joined the delegation carrying it there. This would be his third campaign of a struggle in which he had previously prevailed.

“. . . Paul's religion was not the product of a mind trained in logic . . . at its center is not the mind but the emotions—the mystical exaltation of the self seized by the Spirit.”

At the height of this conflict, shortly before Paul set off for Jerusalem, he wrote his letter to the Roman church, a missive that must have been intended for the eyes of the Jerusalem community as well. In this memorable document, the apostle proclaimed his message of righteousness by faith, promising salvation on the basis of Jesus's atoning death, which is available to both Jews and Gentiles. Strangely, though, he did not seem to notice that in Romans 9–11 he partly retracted much of his previous teaching. Whether from a latent ethnocentrism or a desire to ingratiate himself with Jewish partisans, he now affirmed that after a full complement of Gentiles has been converted, all of Israel would be saved without reservation—indeed, without even believing in Christ (Romans 11:26). Suddenly, being one of the chosen people seemed more valuable than it did in the first eight chapters.

His explanation for this about-face appears at the beginning of chapter 9: he suffers deeply and personally on account of his many Jewish brothers who have not found salvation in Christ, and he would willingly be accused by Christ if it would effect their deliverance. Coming on the heels of Paul's sharp disparagement of Jewish law, this sounds strange; no doubt, it attests to an ultimate priority of feeling over thought—in Paul as in nearly all humans.

This apparent softening, however, would afford Jews no solace in subsequent eras. In Paul's own Gentile-Christian churches, his special dispensation for Israel could not prevent unbelieving Jews from being damned to eternity, any more than a like provision could save unbelieving Gentiles from condemnation in later times. A subsequent editor of Mark attributes to the risen Jesus a comprehensive curse (Mark 16:16): "Who

believes and is baptized will be saved, but who does not believe will be condemned.”

THE EARLIEST EVANGELIST’S REPUDIATION OF JUDAISM

Mark’s Jesus is a heavenly being with an earthly form. Long before the resurrection, a divine glory illuminated his life. To dramatize this dual nature, Mark places epiphany scenes at the beginning, middle, and end of his account. At Jesus’s baptism, a heavenly voice identifies him as God’s son; in the transfiguration story, the same heavenly voice repeats the title; and at the cross, a Roman centurion—a Gentile—is the first person to confess Jesus’s divine sonship. The first two are divine proclamations addressed only to Jesus and his disciples, but the centurion is a man whose message is to be passed on to others. The

“Christian anti-Judaism on pagan soil received a powerful impetus from Paul, along with others, and had a devastating effect.”

divine mystery is gradually unveiled, but instead of having Jesus claim divinity, it has been assigned to him—on the final occasion by one unlikely to be moved by divine promptings.

The ever-increasing distance between Judaism and what only later was termed “Christianity” stemmed in large measure from Paul’s view of Jesus’s divinity on the basis of his resurrection and the resulting conviction that God’s action alone had conferred that status upon him. Reflecting this view in his Gospel, Mark endows the earthly Jesus with divine powers and continually disparages the disciples for what he sees as their inability to bridge the conceptual gap between the Jesus they know and the Eternal Son. It is this divinization of Jesus (which at least parallels if it is not derived directly from Paul) that led the Gospel tradition inexorably away from the strict monotheism of Judaism.

This separation is evident in Mark’s recurring accounts of conflict with Jewish opponents over Sabbath observance, purity regulations, and the value of sacrifice. But it is most striking in his employment of the temple as a symbol. For Paul, it was enough that Jesus fulfilled Jewish prophecy; Mark has him prophesy the destruction of that very embodiment of Judaism and has his last cry accompanied by the rending of the temple veil that represents the exclusivity and sanctity of the cult. And the contrived concurrence of that cataclysm with the centurion’s confession (the soldier at the cross could not have seen the temple) is an unmistakably symbolic assertion of both Christianity’s supersession of Judaism and the inclusion of Gentiles in God’s scheme of salvation.

PAUL AS A SOURCE OF ALIENATION FROM JUDAISM

Paul himself experienced the Jewish-Christian repudiation of the merger with Gentile Christianity. Not only was the collection he brought to Jerusalem rejected, but hostile Jewish-Christian “brothers” also denounced him to the Roman authorities, charging that he took a Gentile Christian into the temple. Trapped, Paul appealed to the emperor for his life and only thus reached Rome, where he was executed under Nero. He never got to Spain.

However tragic the result, it is only fair to say that the charges against Paul—that he was teaching Diaspora Jews not to circumcise their sons and generally alienating them from the Jewish law—were essentially valid. While these are not explicit items in Paul’s letters (indeed, he emphatically calls on Jews not to renounce circumcision), his preaching had results closely resembling the charges.

Since Jewish Christians in Pauline communities were often a minority alienated from their mother religion, many gave up circumcision and soon lost their Jewish identity. In addition, the apostle’s doctrine of justification by faith not only challenged the sanction of Jewish law but also could easily be misconstrued as libertinism. Last but not least, Paul’s position on the law was anything but clear. Having concluded that a life in Christ provided the answers to all meaningful questions, he made contradictory or equivocating statements about the purview and force of the law; and thereafter staunchly Jewish Christians could no longer come to an understanding with him.

PAUL AND GREEK ENLIGHTENMENT

This self-described “Gentile to the Gentiles and Jew to the Jews” had become, in effect, neither a Gentile nor a Jew. Combining a strong measure of arrogance and a tendency toward vacillation, he must have been perplexing to honest spirits. But, as his great accomplishment attests, this openness on all sides was a good way to succeed. Only in Athens did it cause him to run into a brick wall. When he attempted to impress the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers by proclaiming future judgment through Christ and bodily resurrection, they summarily showed him his limits. His religion, grounded in mystical experiences, was not up to the intellectual challenge of Greece. That he founded no community in Athens may be indicative; it suggests that his remarks in the First Letter to the Corinthians about human wisdom being folly before God were in part an evasion and in part a way of rationalizing the Athenian snub.

For Paul’s religion was not the product of a mind trained in logic—one that objectively examines all concepts and views without yielding to the phantasms of the imagination. Rather, the Hellenistic Christianity that is his legacy showed a supernatural flavor in its subjection to authority and surrender to divine guidance: at its center is not the mind but the emotions—the mystical exaltation of the self seized by the Spirit.

Indeed, the success of Pauline Christianity reflected its accord with the spirit of the time. The world had become weary of thought. People wanted a convenient way to secure their immortality, and one of the most popular was by initia-

tion into mysteries, two examples of which were baptism and the Lord's Supper. Let us be blunt: Paul's brand of Christianity—which became the movement's normative form—constituted a spiritual reaction against the Greek Enlightenment at the same time when state law, customs, and even forms of greeting came to be dominated by authoritarianism. The quintessential freedom of ancient Greece was throttled along with the constitutional spirit of the Roman state. Prerogative replaced research; faith substituted for knowledge; independence of the human spirit gave way to humble subordination to an all-powerful deity in the sky; and slavish observance of divine commandments supplanted natural human morality. When Paul's work was done, the downfall of the vibrant, ancient culture that had grown up out of Hellenism was complete.

THE RESULT OF PAUL'S ACTIVITY

What did Paul accomplish? First of all, it is clear that the Christian Church owes its very existence to this Jewish man from Tarsus; Luke rightly devotes more than half of Acts to the one we may call the real founder of Christianity. And Paul was right when he said that he worked harder than all the rest; he set the course for the future voyage of the Church by transplanting his misunderstanding of the religion of Jesus to Gentile territory and, contrary to his deepest instincts, forged the lasting separation of the church and Israel.

This, in turn, occasioned the tragic outcome of his activity—a chain of events that has extended nearly two millennia beyond the time frame of this narrative. Christian anti-Judaism on pagan soil received a powerful impetus from Paul, along with others, and had a devastating effect. The New Testament authors initiated a shameful tradition of thrashing nonbelieving Jews for not accepting Jesus as their savior. Except for Paul and his brothers in Christ, Judaism would never have been led into this abyss.

In addition, Paul and the other primitive Christians faced insuperable challenges from critical reason, objections that undermine nearly every detail of their belief system: (1) the notion that God's Son had to atone for the sins of the world; (2) the nonsensical identification of Jesus with Israel's long-awaited Messiah—and with it the arrogant claims of Paul and of other Christian authors to speak for someone they had never met; (3) the view that human beings can ground in mystical wishes a serious expectation of decisive help; (4) confused statements about the Law that persistently conceal their presuppositions, including the strange notion that a solution—Christ—has already been found before a question can be put; and (5) the claim that a historical event can bring about the personal salvation of all mankind.

One can perhaps understand a man of the first century joining anonymous worshipers of Jesus in making such foolish assertions, but such claims become dangerous when, after two millennia, they are still advocated by the Christian churches, and even by academic theologians. Consider just one example: such people claim that the resurrection of Jesus is of objective, historical significance—indeed, that it is the turning point of world history and thereby an event of cosmic importance.

THE DISASTROUS EFFECT OF CHRISTIAN “MONOTHEISM” AND ITS POLITICAL THEOLOGY

In such apocryphal gospels as those attributed to Thomas and Mary, along with the Sayings Source (Q) and the Didache, we have evidence of the existence of other early Christian traditions, but, by and large, their contributions were marginal, suppressed, or co-opted. It is the proto-orthodox expression of the faith that we have examined, the strand that became what

“Indeed, the success of Pauline Christianity reflected its accord with the spirit of the time. The world had become weary of thought.”

we know as historical Christianity. To narrate the story of this dominant form of primitive Christianity means to make critical judgments about Paul and his brothers in Christ. That the apostle to the Gentiles was a towering figure in primitive Christianity—indeed the real founder of the Church—is certain. But the view that his letters and the rest of the New Testament scriptures represent God's word is a crime against reason and humanity. Studying them today should make us recognize that such thinking offers no useful key to the future. Their image of God cannot claim the respect of nonbelievers but only command obedience purported to avoid the eternal punishment of hell. Primitive Christianity was a christologically distorted monotheism on the brink of becoming a totalitarianism that lacked any respect for dissenters within, and nonbelievers—such as Jews and pagans—outside of, the church. Only three centuries later, in fact, these dissenting (or merely different) groups became the target of a joint action by the “true” believers and the political forces of the Roman Empire. They were destroyed, neutralized, or expelled. The burning of books reported in Acts 19 as a voluntary action by former pagans prefigured centuries of violence against the opponents of Christian orthodoxy. Luke's overtures to the Roman Empire bore rich fruit.

Despite the many unfortunate historical results of primitive Christian apologetics, one can neither deny the human accomplishments of the earliest churches nor doubt that these derived in large measure from their members' conscious commitment to what they perceived as God. At the same time, the religious zeal of its representatives remains suspiciously close to a fanaticism that, since it found an ally in political power, cost the lives of at least a million people per century for the last two millennia. Unfortunately, as history shows, conflict inevitably turns that kind of commitment against the well-being of mere mortal men and women. **ff**

A Faith Suited for the Dark Ages

Arthur Blech

As the old order faded away, a new order made its appearance intending, not by force of arms but by a newly designed creed, to re-establish harmony and accord a new orientation among a multiplicity of uprooted nations seeking stability. This new order was claimed by Christianity represented by the Roman Church, aspiring to instil its authority by a complex ecclesiastical hierarchy of Bishops, priests, and in due time, by Cardinals and a Pope, as Vicar of Christ, the apostolic successor to St. Peter. Led by an ambitious clergy who stealthily schemed to reach the heights of temporal power not only coequal with that of kings and emperors, but surpassing their authority by having recourse to the most impenetrable, esoteric and mystical construction of divine sanction. With astounding ease and daring, the Church theologians dulled the senses of the literate and illiterate alike by dispensing knowledge of the transcendental with self-assurance befitting the elect given the power of divine insight. They inverted the simple and upbeat message of the Gospels and Epistles about the Kingdom of God on Earth and substituted the natural sinfulness of man exposed to the dread of everlasting hellfire, a fire burning without consuming and agony without let up, to subdue any hesitancy of the adherents to strict obedience to the clergy and reinforce the terror of excommunication, interdiction, anathema, blasphemy and heresy. A small group of men, however intelligent, could only prevail and maintain their position of power by trading on the primal fear of man of the unknown and perpetuate the myth of salvation exclusively dispensed by the clergy. The life of faithful Christians during the Dark Ages and many centuries after, was one of painstakingly avoiding the pitfalls of sin and eternal damnation, attending Church services and Mass regularly as required, seeking forgiveness, grace and absolution of sins known and unknown. At every turn the fatherly figure of the Church priest made his presence felt involving himself and the Church in the major events of life with appro-

Arthur Blech, a commercial real estate developer and cattle rancher, is also the author of several books on critical issues facing society. This article, "A Faith Suited for the Dark Ages," is Chapter 4, Part Four of his book, Toward a New Civilization: Why We Must Tame Our Instincts to Save Our World (Prometheus, 2005). We reprint it in its entirety and with the permission of the publisher.

priate rituals: birth, marriage, death and burial. Christianity became a religion of fear, hate, revenge, accusations of heresy for ever so slight deviations of belief; frowned upon and condemned freedom of speech and thought; feared and denounced progress and anything that questioned or criticized ecclesiastical authority; showed little mercy for apostates for fear of disrupting the status quo; forged, corrupted, altered and concealed the interpolation of documents with changes helpful to its creed and dogma. Finally, the Church considered itself the sole dispenser of the true faith, consigning all others to the heap of blasphemy (in this respect it did not differ materially from other religions). It was truly a faith ideally suited for the Dark Ages and the few centuries following, until the depravity of its clergy and the unstoppable progress of spiritual enlightenment affected the views of enough men to open the gateway to radical dissent, to positivism and humanism, culminating in agnosticism and various forms of atheism.

But the small group of self-appointed men prevailed by other means. The few people who held spiritual power in the Roman Church corresponded to the few people of nobility who held secular power in the State. From the time of Constantine until the French Revolution, the interests of Church and State coincided in Christian countries, the spiritual and secular joined forces to hold sway over masses of slaves and former slaves, the underprivileged, the illiterate people close to or crossing the borderline of poverty, who eked out a daily existence without assurance of tomorrow, fearful in their insecurity but encouraged by the promise of a blissful afterlife if they dutifully obeyed the rules of the Church and the laws of the State. The Church soon gained primacy in this alliance which lasted until the secular rulers also claimed their status by divine right (which circumstance they learned from the Church) and regained their predominance. But until that time, the Church felt all-powerful and exercised its authority with a degree of profligacy, self-indulgence, malice and calculated cruelty unique in the annals of history. Nothing was too vile, too scandalous, too savage or ruthless if such actions gained the Church an advantage. Even if the Roman Church could claim validity based on the doctrine of apostolic succession (which claim is a total invention, as shown above), its subsequent conduct during the centuries of arrogance and crude domination would have assuredly repudiated and rendered null and void any claims to divine blessing, and the institution should have been consigned to everlasting torment in hell as it imperiously promised would happen to any sinner not even remotely guilty of such misconduct. But then all powerful secular rulers

and priesthods of old (and not so old) ever commanding similar authority and operating in similar fluid and unstable circumstances would have likewise crossed the line and been guilty of such villainous conduct.

The Roman Church was plagued by what it considered heresies throughout its existence. In the early period Gnosticism, Arianism, Montanism and Marcionism tormented the Church Fathers in their attempts to modify and preempt the loose orthodox creed; such deviations were combated with uncommon resoluteness and brutality, most often involving violence and bloodshed of Christians opposing Christians; the Roman Church learned early the art of protecting and maintaining its primacy through thick and thin; that the lesson was well learned is clearly evident from its subsequent history and the continuity of its survival that would have daunted most institutions. If we could understand the Roman Church (the later Roman Catholic Church) and the ecclesiastical hierarchy to be a monopolistic commercial institution dispensing faith and salvation instead of manufactured products, we should then understand that anything interfering or disturbing that monopoly, and thus undermine their privileged status by subverting the faith it dispenses and the benefices it enjoys, would necessarily be resisted and condemned with all the means at its disposal, as would be the case with any commercial monopoly. But as soon as the Roman Church (and certain other Christian sects) lost its power, prestige and influence (after the French Revolution of the 18th century), it relented in its hatred and antagonism to social forces and devoted whatever prestige and influence it could muster to social and moral causes, becoming an advocate of the poor and ailing, expending considerable efforts to relieve their suffering, implementing a strict code of priestly conduct to avoid the scandals which plagued it in the past (It could not, however, shake off some of its affected concerns for abortion and euthanasia, the marriage of priests, the ordination of women, and that intractable mother of all inventions: deicide). Gone were the forced confessions under torture; the prison dungeons and fiery stakes; the Crusades and Inquisitions; the burning of witches; the placing of papal interdicts on whole communities; the sale of indulgences to raise funds for worldly papal extravagances; the papal chess game switching kings, bishops and knights to serve papal interests; instigating murderous wars to settle perceived theological quarrels and disputes; the arbitrary condemnation of man's conduct as sinful deserving punishment in the afterlife or denial of rewards in heaven; placing certain authors' works on the index of prohibited books the reading and possession of which incurred mortal sin and the burning of such books; declaring secular learning harmful to morality; promising the faithful heavenly rewards for fighting and dying in battles for the Church; preaching and declaring Holy Wars against recalcitrant rulers; impeding scientific progress by threats to haul scientists before the Holy Office to answer trivial and frivolous charges formulated by ignorant men with power of life and death; and finally, the Church instigated and organized persecutions of Jews and their forced conversion, justified on spurious theological and historical grounds, causing unspeakable suffering, privation and bloodshed to innocent Jewish men, women and children.

The Roman and later Catholic Church and Christianity, in general, have maintained a world outlook that was hostile to the progress of civilization, to the spirit of the Renaissance, to basic democratic ideals and aims, to freedom of expression. It could

not be different for it is based, like most other religions, on intolerance of dissent, on doctrines of myths and the improbable, praising the value of faith but discounting the worth of understanding as useless for salvation, since the divine mysteries require unquestioning acceptance by the faithful. They know nothing, nor do they care to know anything, nor are they capable of assimilating the knowledge of the dangers to the ecology by unrestricted population growth and the pollution such growth causes to the environment and its adverse effects on the survival of the human species. They are totally oblivious of man's Nature-given instincts of self-preservation which coexist with innate life-sustaining attributes, such as greed, envy, jealousy, avarice and rapacity, all of which are considered sinful by the Church if committed by the laity but not so if practiced by the clergy. It is all very well to preach not to worry about nourishment or how to clothe the body; not to worry about tomorrow because tomorrow will take care of itself; to bless those who curse you; not to ask for return of stolen property; to lend money without hope of return and to love one's enemies—could anyone contrive more absurd and irresponsible preachments that are totally contrary to human nature and social order, totally outside the realm of morality, and can, therefore, never govern human conduct? These sayings of Jesus, quoted in the Gospels, could not have been expounded by rational men but instead sound like the absent-minded daydreamings of some cloistered monks, living in seclusion in some monastery and totally separated from, and ignorant of, the humdrum existence of humans struggling to keep body and soul together—they are totally amoral. Anyone studying the history of the Papacy and supporting clergy during the early centuries and up to the French Revolution, must be completely dumbfounded upon learning of the clergy's criminal conduct; accumulation of wealth through fraud, extortion and murder; the sexual depravity of the Popes, Cardinals, Bishops and priests; the quest for political and military power; the excommunication, imprisonment and murder of Pope by Popes; the violation and debasement of every norm of accepted civilized conduct, the total absence of decency and morality, the treachery, corruption, mendacity and venality bordering on the insane; the maintenance of brothels in the Vatican; the dabbling in witchcraft and Satanism; the prevalence of fornication and sodomy; the liberal use of poison to dispose of enemies—all these charges can be laid at the doorstep of the Vicars of Christ (there were notable exceptions), these corrupt representatives on Earth, who disgraced their calling and deserve nothing but contempt, loathing and scorn. What teaching did they follow? Not the New Testament. We see very little concern for the hungry, poor, disabled, orphan or widow during the period under discussion. Their reprehensible and outrageous conduct constitutes a cancer on the body of Christianity that cannot be expunged, purged or erased. Yet these men tainted by guilt made sanctimonious pronouncements, convened numerous conciliar meetings dealing with Church doctrines, creed and dogma, hair-splitting rules of theological discernment for which they claimed an ecumenical status in the Western world. To these belong the various Lateran Councils, briefly described in order of their date sequence.

First Lateran Council (1123) Attended by 300 Bishops and about 600 Abbots, dealt with episcopal control of granting the cure for souls; cohabitation of clerks with women; clerical concubinage and marriage; safeguards for Church property; protection of Church goods; alienation of Church property by intruders;

indulgences for Crusaders; matters generally dealing with the establishment of order and discipline within the Church.

Second Lateran Council (1139) Attended by between 500 and 1,000 Archbishops, Bishops and Abbots, dealt with rights of Bishops and clerks; sanctions against those condemning the Eucharist; prohibition of payment for Confirmation, Extreme Unction and burials; clerical dress and behavior; married clerks and those with concubines; marriage after solemn vows of chastity; the prohibition of study of civil law and medicine by the religious; protection of monks, pilgrims and merchants; nuns failing to live by their rules; the prohibition of usury; false penitence.

Third Lateran Council (1179) Attended by about 300 Bishops, dealt with ruling that required a two-thirds majority of the Cardinals in all future papal elections; occupations forbidden to clerks; clerical and Church immunities; clerical vices; regulations concerning the Templars; sanctions against cooperating with the Saracens.

Fourth Lateran Council (1215) Attended by more than 400 Archbishops and Bishops, dealt with the promotion of a new Crusade; the obligation of preaching and supporting the Crusade; condemnation of the heresy of the Cathari and Waldenses; procedural rules for the repression of heresy; the confirmation of Pope Innocent III earlier rejection of Magna Carta, judged to have been extorted from King John and therefore invalid; neglect by clerks of their spiritual duties; on privileges enjoyed during interdict; the prohibition of blessing of the hot iron and hot water for judicial ordeals; no Christian was to have commerce with usurious Jews; Jews and Saracens were to wear distinctive dress to mark them off Christians; Jews were forbidden to appear in public in Holy Week to avoid the risk of insult to Christians.

Fifth Lateran Council (1512-1517) Attended by 150 Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Abbots and Prelates, dealt with condemnation of the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges; declared papal elections null and void if tainted with simony; regulations regarding the Curia's taxation system; definition of the individuality of the human soul; the censorship of books; decision for a Crusade against the Turks; imposition of a 3 year tax on all benefices.

What conclusion can be drawn from these deliberations of so many assembled dignitaries? Not one single word was expressed by those well-fed and well-provided clergy on behalf of the poor, hungry, aged, widows, orphans; no funds for orphanages or hospices for the dying; no protection for the virgins; no alleviation of the plight of the incarcerated fellow Christians or others; no condemnation of the abuse of power and immorality of the clergy. But Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) condemned the English barons for improperly extorting from King John a document known as Magna Carta (1215), and declared invalid on that account, a document of monumental politico-historical importance, which limited the power of the king by guaranteeing certain civil and political liberties, the first such concessions by any monarch. The same Pope, however, did not invalidate the forced confessions extracted from poor wretches under torture, victimized for their perceived heretical views and consigned to the flames for admitting guilt. That same Pope not only made current the title of Vicar of Christ, but claimed the right to govern the whole world by virtue of that cognomen. The Lateran Councils also gained notoriety for instigating the murderous Crusades not only against infidels but also against Christian sectarians (the Albigenses), the censorship of books, and order-

ing Jews and Saracens to wear a distinctive dress to make them easily recognizable by Christians.

Although Christianity was born when men's ignorance was overwhelming and its faith manifested intolerance and aggression, it nevertheless performed an essential historical function: After the destruction of the Western Roman Empire it saved Europe from total chaos, disorder and lawlessness. The Church was the only unifying authority in Europe capable of functioning as a government. It would be idle to speculate whether the price paid was worth the cost. It is highly unlikely that other secular competing forces would not have found a solution and filled the void without the benefit of Christianity. For we learn from history that the bloody conflicts of the human race have never halted, but have continued unabated and unaffected by any moral or religious scruples, considerations or influences. It is undisputed that Christianity was solely responsible for instigating religious wars, Crusades, religious persecutions and massacres, tortures, inquisitorial burnings and other criminal acts which, but for Christianity, would not be part of history. What a depressing record. What a debasement of human worthiness. It is hard to think of any institution created by humans which would retard more that spark of spiritual dignity that resides within man than the confabulations of this blood-stained clergy, and all this in the name of a religion that preaches the nobility of resplendent love.

The Goths sacked Rome in 410 A.D. under Alaric. In 476 the Ostrogoths completed the destruction of the Roman Empire under King Odovaker, ruling until 526. In 415 Attila the Hun invaded Italy but died before sacking Rome and his army had to retreat. This enabled Christianity to seize political control and shape European life for more than a 1,000 years. The ensuing theological disputes became contests for worldly gains rather than efforts to settle differences over theological principles. Throughout all the initial turmoil, the Roman Church managed to hold two councils to resolve what it considered "urgent issues".

Council of Ephesus (431) Attended by about 150 Bishops. After several strange excommunications, it decided on the personage of Christ, stating that his natures must be distinguished but must be united and assigned to one sole person, the two natures constitute one Christ and the one Son, the difference in natures is not suppressed by the union but the indescribable meeting of divinity and humanity produces one sole Christ.

Council of Chalcedon (451) Defined one Christ, perfect God and man, consubstantial with the Father and consubstantial with man, one sole being with two natures, without division and separation and without confusion or change. The union does not suppress the difference in natures; however, their properties remain untouched and are joined together in one Person.

In case one wonders how the Bishops could find time to meditate upon such refinements of dogma in the face of the ongoing pillage and plunder by invaders, suffice it to say that Chalcedon marked an important step in the development of Roman primacy, as opposed to a "Church of the Empire" held by the emperors of Constantinople, which ultimately led to the schism in 1054 between the Christian Churches of East and West. Rome held the belief in the twofold nature of Christ which the East rejected. But nobody really believes that was the real motif. The reason for the split was more mundane: the ascendancy of political influence and economic wealth of Rome and the corresponding decline of Constantinople. **ff**

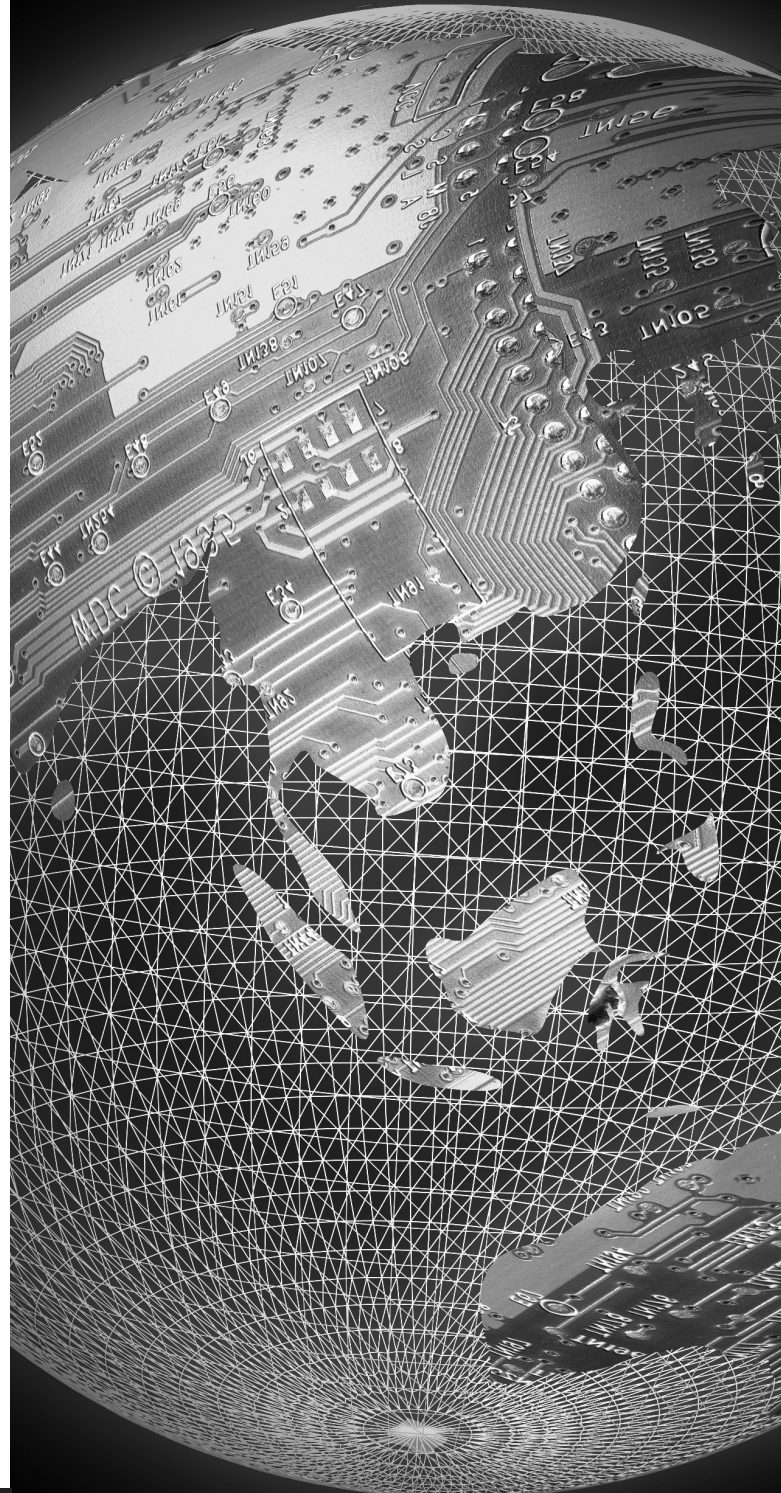
Science and Belief on the Cusp of the 'Chinese Century'

China is emerging as the dominant economy of this century. With its enormous population, a growing middle class, and its transition from Maoism to a socialist brand of state capitalism, China's global influence will likely grow for decades to come. It will do this, however, only if it can avoid ecological catastrophe, starvation due to unchecked population growth, and an expected deadly outbreak of avian flu. Poised to host the 2008 Olympic Games, Beijing is rapidly transforming into a thoroughly modern city, bulldozing its slums and erecting new apartment complexes. It is also attempting to curb its rampant smog. Brought about by a runaway growth in traffic tied to the runaway growth of an urban middle class, its ill effects are compounded by seasonal dust storms.

China is a mass of contradictions. The Chinese are, officially, atheists, since they are communists—a label they retain despite having abandoned almost all the economic trappings of communism. Yet, most Chinese also abide by several religious and philosophical traditions, even where those beliefs and practices seem to contradict claims of atheism. It is not unusual for an educated, modern Chinese person to simultaneously be an avowed atheist, a Buddhist, and a Confucian who also practices Taoist meditative techniques and seeks the help of traditional Chinese medicine.

The Center for Inquiry will hold a world congress in Beijing in October 2007, emphasizing the goals that critical inquirers worldwide hold in common: encouraging objective examination of every belief, promoting scientific progress, and upholding the necessity of secular institutions in a modern polity. In fact, the secular ethical traditions of China have much in common with the Center for Inquiry's planetary call for a new Enlightenment, and this will be an excellent opportunity for dialogue and education as East meets West. The following articles were written by two of our Chinese colleagues, Zhi-Kang Tian and Xiufeng Liu, and address issues that will be among those explored at the conference in October.

—David Koepsell, the executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism and an associate editor of FREE INQUIRY



The State of Science and Technology

Zhi-Kang Tian and Xiufeng Liu

Like many countries, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is placing a great emphasis on science and technology for its economic development. Government policies clearly exhibit this emphasis. For example, the State Council of the Chinese central government recently issued *The National Mid-term and Long-term Science and Technology Development Plan: 2006–2020*. The development plan calls for a sharp change in policy from the country's long-standing emphasis on following the scientific and technological achievements of developed countries to a new one of "proprietary innovation, leap-forward [development] in priority fields, scaffolded development, and leading the future." "Proprietary innovation" means increasing original and integrated innovations as well as progress based on the digestion and absorption of imports, so that the overall national capacity for innovation is increased. "Leap-forward in priority fields" is based on the belief that, in order to be the best, it is necessary to be selective. Thus, in order to achieve breakthroughs, it is necessary to concentrate resources and efforts in a few priority fields that already show strength, have good foundations, and are critical to people's lives and national security. This results in "leap-forward" development. "Scaffolded development" strives for breakthroughs in technologies that are both key and common, and which are urgently needed and foundational for sustainable, coordinated economic and social development. "Leading the future" refers to a planning strategy that seeks to anticipate future development of cutting-edge technologies. Basic research is directed toward creating new market demands and developing new industries, leading the future of development. The overall goals of the development plan, over the next fifteen years, are:

- to increase significantly the country's capacity for proprietary innovation;
- to greatly stimulate economic and social development and safeguard national security through science and technology (hereafter, S&T);

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- to support the full development of a prosperous society;
- to enhance significantly the overall strength of basic research and cutting-edge technology development; and
- to make a series of S&T breakthroughs of international importance.

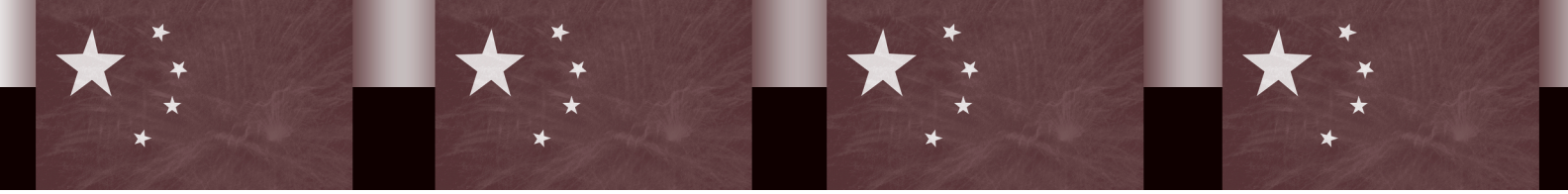
Achieving those goals is projected to help China secure its place as a country of innovation—and a world science and technology power—by the middle of this century.

In order to achieve the above goals, China will undertake the following measures:

- Identifying a number of priority areas, based on China's current national status and needs, for targeted breakthroughs in a series of key technologies, so that the overall supporting capacity of S&T for national development is increased;
- Carrying out selected special projects that align with strategic goals to "leap forward" and to fill blanks in China's capabilities;
- Advancing planning for cutting-edge technologies and basic research to meet future challenges, in order to enhance the nation's capacity for sustainable innovation capable of driving economic and social development; and
- Deepening reform of government systems, adjusting relevant policies and measures, increasing investment in S&T, therefore enhancing human capital, and establishing a national system of innovation providing reliable support for China to become one of the world's nations of innovation.

Consistent with the above strategic goals and measures, China has identified a number of priority areas for science and technology development, including technologies related to energy, water resources, and environmental protection. Planners are determined to address bottleneck issues that limit economic and social development. Given the unique opportunities, rapid information technology upgrading, and development in new materials technologies will provide in the upcoming years, China has also identified the development of proprietary intellectual properties in equipment manufacturing and key information-industry technologies in order to raise its competitiveness. Other priorities include biotechnology and its applications in agriculture, industry, population control, and public health; accelerating the development of aerospace and marine technologies; and strengthening basic research and cutting-edge technological development through interdisciplinary research.

In order to achieve the strategic goals, particularly filling blanks in national strategic areas, priority has been placed on concentrating technical and materials resources to produce



strategic products through a few major special projects within a limited time frame. There are eleven such major special projects:

- core electronic devices;
- high-end generic chips and software;
- super-integrated circuit-manufacturing technology and associated industrial techniques;
- new-generation broadband mobile telecommunication, high-end programmed machine tools and key manufacturing technologies;
- large-scale drilling of coal, oil, and gas fields;
- large, advanced, pressurized water reactor and high-temperature, air-cooled nuclear power stations;
- water contamination control and treatment;
- cultivation of new genetically modified biospecies; major new drugs, prevention and control of major infectious diseases (e.g., HIV/AIDS, and viral hepatitis);
- large cargo aircraft;
- high-resolution earth-surveying systems; and
- manned space and lunar exploration.

The above major special projects involve a range of strategic industrial sectors—including the information and biological industries—and address urgent issues related to energy

resources, environment, and people's health. They also involve dual-purpose technologies that are appropriate for both civic and military uses including national defense.

Key policies to facilitate those S&T emphases are needed to allow enterprises to become the main body of technological innovation, greatly increase investment in S&T, establish a national system of innovation, and accelerate building a national talent pool. According to Kang Jia, director of the Institute of Science and Technology of the State Ministry of Finance, China's GDP in 2020 is expected to reach thirty-six trillion Chinese yuan (about US\$4 trillion), assuming a conservative annual economic growth rate of 7.12 percent. As a result, China will invest more than 900 billion Chinese yuan (about US\$120 billion) in science and technology. The S&T investment strategy outlined above will provide necessary resources for innovation that will make China a world S&T power by the middle of this century.  

Further Reading

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Environmental Crises

Zhi-Kang Tian and Xiufeng Liu

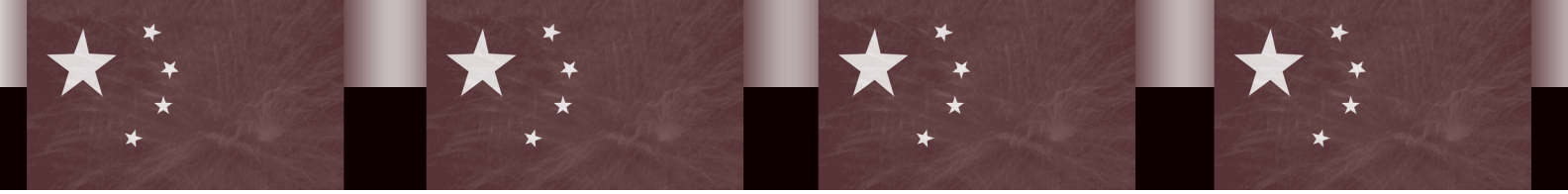
China's 2006 gross domestic product (GDP) was estimated at 20,940.7 billion Chinese yuan (about US\$2,617.6 billion), up 10.7 percent from the previous year. At the same time, the quality of China's environment decreased significantly as areas of environmental pollution expanded. Among the environmental crises China faces is water pollution, which is particularly serious in China's three main rivers: the Huaihe River, the Yellow River, and the Yangtze River. The recent history of water-pollution treatment and control in the Huaihe River illustrates the seriousness of this problem and the challenge it poses for China.

In August 2005, two journalists of the Xinhua News Agency of China wrote a long report on water pollution in the Huaihe River basin titled "The Grief on the Two Firsts over Ten Years." "Two Firsts" refer to the two major regulations promulgated, ten years apart, by the Chinese government. In August 1995, the government issued "Interim Regulations on the Prevention of Water Pollution in the Huaihe River Valley," the first regulation in Chinese history to focus specifically upon a single river. This regulation was intended to control and prevent the peren-

nial large-scale pollution accidents that threatened drinking water supplies after China's effective policy of "development first, pollution treatment second" was put into action. The regulation set the following restrictions on water pollution: (1) industrial discharge in the entire river basin must meet the national standards by 1997; and (2) water quality in all rivers, lakes, and reservoirs of the Huaihe basin must meet specific requirements, so as to bring about a clean watershed by 2000. Millions in Chinese currency was spent in order to achieve these goals.

Ten years later, on April 29, 2005, China's State Environmental Protection Administration held a news conference to announce its emergency plan to control water pollution in the Huaihe River basin, effective immediately. This was another first in Chinese history: the first emergency environmental plan. It was implemented to protect the safety of drinking water during the dry season since the 1995 campaign to clean the Huaihe had failed. Large-scale pollution existed in 2005 at the same levels as ten years earlier, with major water pollution indicators exceeding the highest levels previously recorded in Chinese history. Only 37 percent of water-quality indicators met the standards set by the Chinese State Council.

The situation of the Yellow River isn't any better. China's second-longest river (after the Yangtze) and the fifth-longest in



the world, the Yellow River faces an escalating environmental challenge. According to a recent article in *China Youth Daily*, the Yellow's middle and upper reaches in the provinces and autonomous regions of Ningxia, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi, and Shannxi have been especially hard-hit. Numerous industrial parks have been created along the river, each imposing a high energy demand and producing significant pollution. In villages, smokestacks are being erected like trees in a forest, and smoke blackens the sky. Sewage is discharged directly into the river, while additional waste is being dumped onto the grasslands. Many persons live in heavily polluted areas in which diseases break out frequently. Statistics show that sewage discharge into the Yellow River has doubled over the last twenty years—more than ten major tributaries have become mere “sewage ditches,” and nearly 40 percent of the mainstream sections have ceased to function biologically as living bodies of water.

We turn now to the Yangtze River, the longest river in China and the third longest in the world. While water quality in the Yangtze is *generally* good, certain mainstream sections and tributaries are heavily polluted. According to statistics, sewage discharge into the Yangtze was 9.5 billion tons per annum at the end of the 1970s, 15 billion tons per annum at the end of the 1980s, 20 billion tons per annum in 1998, and almost 30 billion tons per annum in 2005. Industrial wastewater accounts for about 68.8 percent of the material being discharged. The water intakes for more than five hundred major cities along the Yangtze River have been contaminated to varying degrees by polluting sources upstream. More than half of the lakes in the river basin are in a state of eutrophication, resulting in untreated water being dangerous for human consumption. The heavy pollution has resulted in a trend of “desertification” (loss of the ability to sustain life), endangering some rare fish species, such as the Chinese river dolphin (*Lipotes verillifer*) and Yangtze reeves shad (*Hilsa reevesii*). Wenxuan Cao, a well-known ichthyologist at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, predicted that “if environmental deterioration continues, freshwater fish will likely become extinct in the Yangtze River within forty years.”

In addition to water pollution, air pollution also poses a serious threat to China's environment. In 2006, the Chemical Oxygen Demand (COD)—a major index of air pollution—showed an increase in emissions of sulphur dioxide along with other major air pollutants. Centralized treatment of domestic sewage and decontamination of household garbage are nonexistent in many Chinese cities. At a recent media briefing, Pan Yue, the vice minister of the State Environmental Protection Agency, announced that 2006 was the bleakest year on record for China's environment. There were 161 severe pollution accidents, on average, one every two days. Some 600,000 people filed environmental complaints, a 30 percent increase from 2005. Yearly targets set by the State Council at the beginning of last year, such as cutting energy consumption by 4 percent and pollution emission by 2 percent, were not met. To the contrary, pollutant levels actually *increased*.

Environmental challenges act as a bottleneck, restricting China's economic and social development. Though China has made great efforts in environmental protection both legislatively and administratively, these efforts have not yet paid off. According to Geping Qu, the first minister of the Chinese Environmental Protection Administration, in over a quarter-century of economic reform and opening up to the outside world, China has made remarkable progress in environmental protection, and yet many problems still exist. The goals set by the government have never been fully met. The “Report on Chinese Modernization: 2007,” released by the Research Group on Chinese Modernization Strategy at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, indicates that China's level of “ecological modernization” was ranked a dismal 100 among 118 developing and developed countries in 2004, having failed to ecologically modernize in comparison to other nations over the last three years. The main reasons cited for the current environmental crisis are: (1) too-rapid GDP growth, industrialization, and urbanization, contributing to increasing pollution discharge and pressure for environmental treatment and control; (2) slow progress in major pollution treatment projects; (3) lack of government economic policies; (4) lack of strong administrative measures for implementing and monitoring environmental treatment and control; (5) unsustainable economic growth due to a “dollar-and-cent” view of development among government officials (particularly local ones), marked by a tendency to push aside their environmental protection responsibilities in deference to “economic development imperatives”; and (6) miscellaneous other issues such as “market failure,” “government failure,” and local protectionism.

As China's economy continues in its rapid growth, how China deals with its environmental crisis will be a major challenge. Economic growth should not take place at the cost of serious or irremediable damage to the environment. **fi**

Further Reading

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Where's the Meaning in a Natural World?

John Shook

When people ask about the meaning of the world, their question is usually driven by something more than philosophical curiosity. To ask seriously for the universe's meaning is to reveal a deep anxiety—a profound perplexity that ordinary common sense cannot appease. Even if this question bothers only a few people with any frequency, it will arise for most of us at some time in our lives. Many of us have had a taste of this perplexity. Like myself, you may occasionally be struck by the apparent senselessness of events, especially tragic ones. Our reservoir of experience and knowledge fails to supply a sufficient answer to that anguished “Why?” We are suddenly confronted with a tear in the fabric of reason that may never be mended, and we feel more fragile, more vulnerable. People who really worry about the entire world's meaning feel frightened by the widening rift in reason's fabric that threatens to unravel all other previously sound explanations with it. How could the entire natural world lose its meaning? We should first ask what it could mean for the entire world to *have* a meaning.

Asking “Why?” is a basic human ability. We are apparently capable of asking for an explanation for virtually anything. But finding a satisfying answer is not always so easy. Answers, even when available, may strike us as incomplete or vague; they may, in turn, raise more questions. Sometimes, an answer that may be quite satisfying in one context may be entirely irrelevant in another. For example, a person asking for an explanation of a clock's functioning may be satisfied to learn how its spring and gears work together to move the clock's hands at a precise rate. But this explanation of mechanics will not satisfy the curiosity of the person who wants to know what a clock is *for*; i.e., what purpose that sort of machine serves. Alternatively, a person may instead be curious about what is signified by the position of the clock's hands and ask, “What do the positions of the clock's hands mean?”

As another example, one person asking for an explanation of the player called “the center” on a basketball team may be satisfied with learning that this player is so called because he or she takes a position at the center of the court nearest to the basket. But what if another person wants an explanation of what the

center is doing at a specific point in the game and asks, “What is the center now trying to accomplish with the basketball?”

Four types of explanations have been mentioned, and they may be labeled “mechanical,” “functional,” “signifying,” and “agent.” A mechanical explanation describes causal relationships between objects over a course of time that have resulted in a present state of affairs happening now (for example, the energy being transferred from the spring through the gears to the clock's hands). A functional explanation describes how some object or event serves some specific purpose for agents (people can tell time using the clock, and a basketball team can use the center to get the basketball into the hoop from close range). A signifying explanation describes how some object or event signifies something else (when the clock's hands both point straight up, then the time is twelve o'clock). An agent explanation describes how someone or something is trying to accomplish an envisioned goal using a certain means (a basketball center trying to score two points by putting the ball through the hoop, for example).

In brief, there are four kinds of questions, each requiring a different explanation: “How does it work?”; “What is it for?”; “What does it signify”; and “What is it trying to do?” Further kinds of questions and explanations may be distinguished, but these four primary kinds are sufficient for our discussion of the meaning of the world. When a person wants to understand the world so that it has meaning, any of these four requests for explanations may be intended.

In these modern times, answers to the first question (“How does nature work?”) come from science's growing knowledge about the natural world and its laws. Science discovers how the many parts of nature interact according to lawful and (more or less) predictable regularities and how nature is evolving over time. It is not science's proper task to inquire into how all of existence as a whole is working with other entities beyond itself (if such exist). For example, when cosmologists offer theories that try to explain the Big Bang origins of our universe by postulating prior quantum fields or alternative multi-universes, these cosmologists are not postulating things beyond natural existence but are instead postulating an expansion of what is meant by *all of natural reality*. Our conception of “the natural world” has periodically been expanded by science in this way. Analogously, the notion of other “worlds” beyond our solar system was a shock in the eighteenth century, and the discovery of other galaxies in the twentieth century dramatically enlarged our natural world. Likewise, when science learns about how our visible universe came into existence, it will not

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discover anything supernatural but will rather expand our conception of natural reality. A person looking for the meaning of the world in how it works must take the responsibility of learning about science and its discoveries.

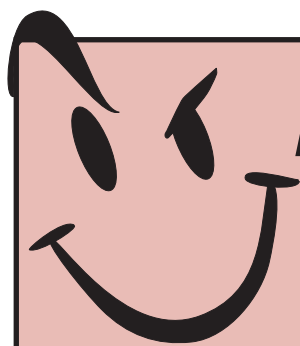
Moving on to the next option, a person may instead be asking, “What is nature for?” A functional explanation of the natural world would describe how it serves some purpose for an agent or agents. The agent(s) may be part of the natural world, or perhaps be imagined as existing supernaturally beyond the natural world. Natural agents are created by the evolution of the world and take advantage of the world’s workings by understanding its regularities. People find the world useful and meaningful when they can predict and control some of its workings to their advantage. The world is meaningful because people can live in it and achieve their goals in life. If someone who worries about the world’s meaning is not satisfied with this answer, it might be because nature has failed to sufficiently help him or her achieve his or her goals; or one may feel that he or she doesn’t *have* meaningful goals. In either case, the world doesn’t prove entirely lacking a meaning, since such a person could modify his or her goals to make the world useful again. However, if one wanted to avoid taking any responsibility for making the world meaningful, looking to the supernatural might be tempting: perhaps something beyond the universe finds the world useful for some purpose of its own.

Two kinds of questions remain up for discussion. A person asking “What does nature signify?” is wondering how the nat-

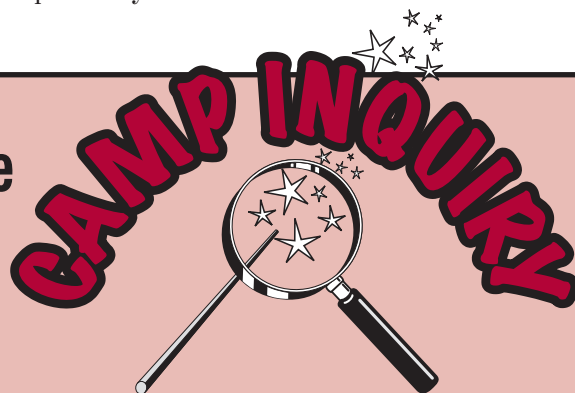
ural world signifies anything if not something supernatural. Much theological effort has been expended in attempts to see enough design in the world to indicate what lies beyond. Even if the universe is a sign, it is not a sign for us: we didn’t design the world, and we know little or nothing about what the world is supposed to signify. The entire responsibility for making the world a sign would have to lie beyond nature.

Answering the last type of question (“What is nature trying to do?”) demands even greater powers of imaginative speculation. Trying to picture the universe as *having* intended goals—Does this turn the universe into some sort of god?—is even harder than trying to picture what the universe could be aiming at. All the same, wondering what the world is doing awards all the responsibility for the world’s meaning to the world—not to us.

We can summarize this exploration of the world’s meaning quite simply. The easiest way to find meaning in the world is to ask the first two questions, “How does nature work?” and “What is nature for?” To answer these questions, one need only to apply science for discovering how the world works and to utilize this knowledge for achieving appropriate goals in this life. These tasks are not easy, but they are our natural responsibility. Gaining and applying knowledge gives meaning to one’s life as well as to the world. There is another path, away from responsibility, that leads towards speculation about the supernatural. But there is nothing “natural” about avoiding responsibility. **FB**



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Edd Doerr and Tom Flynn

▲ After legal pressure from Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a Maryland public-school district has discontinued holding graduation ceremonies in an evangelical church, the décor of which included a large “Jesus Is The Lord!” sign. Montgomery County Schools Superintendent Jerry Weast opted to pay a higher rental fee to secure a secular space for this year’s ceremonies.—TF

In the latest chapter in the unending saga of the campaign to force all taxpayers to support faith-based schools, the Utah legislature in early February approved a voucher plan to provide millions of dollars per year to sectarian and other private schools. Not only did these solons thumb their noses at the state’s voters, who rejected a similar plan by 70 to 30 percent in a 1988 referendum, but they also flipped the bird, so to speak, at the Utah constitution, which ever-so-clearly forbids such foolishness.

The case against school vouchers or their analogs is, of course, well known. They would compel all taxpayers to support sectarian indoctrination. They would fragment our school population along lines of creed, class, ethnicity, language, ability level, and others—as if the lessons of Iraq, Northern Ireland, and the former Yugoslavia went in one ear and out the other, unimpeded by brains. They would unnecessarily increase the costs of education while lowering its overall quality, wrecking democratic public education and reducing the attractiveness of the teaching profession.—ED

▼ A “stealth” yoga program based on Hindu spiritual disciplines has been adopted by more than one hundred schools in

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twenty-six states. Tara Guber, wife of former movie mogul Peter Guber and a yoga enthusiast, translated Sanskrit mantras into English, renamed meditation “time in,” and dubbed yogic panting as “bunny breathing.” Educators are falling for it, despite protests by Christian and secularist parents who still see the program as a stalking horse for Eastern spirituality. (Maybe there *is* something to Eastern religion, if it can bring Christians and secularists together!)—TF

Contrary to the claims of school voucher promoters, private secular schools show a decline in parent attendance at school events, and private religious schools show a decrease in parent involvement in all areas.



An important study (or “working paper”) relating to vouchers or their variants has been released by the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education. The study, by economist Jack Buckley, “Choosing Schools, Building Communities: The Effect of Schools of Choice on Parent Involvement,” looks at the many studies that purport to show that school “choice,” involving faith-based and secular private schools, increases parental involvement in their children’s education and actually improves education.

Buckley examines the vast literature on this produced by voucher promoters and then asks: “Clearly, one putative outcome of school choice reform [sic] is the transformation of parents from passive clients of government service to active partners entitled to a say in how schools are run and how students are taught. But do schools of choice actively foster parent involvement or are they passive beneficiaries of a sorting process by which motivated parents with a propensity to be involved self-select schools?”

Using data from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, Buckley analyzed such factors in school selection as household income, number of children in a household, whether the child has a disability, whether or not parents speak English as their primary language, level of parental education, ethnicity or race, racial composition of the household’s zip code area, whether both parents are present in the household, and whether the child is female. Unfortunately, he did not take into account the parents’ religious orientation.

Buckley found, contrary to the widespread claims of voucher promoters, that, compared with public schools, “Private secular schools show a decline in parent attendance at school events, but an increase in parent volunteering [these parents tend to be more affluent and to have more disposable time—ED]. Most interesting, private religious schools [about 90 percent of nonpublic-school enrollment] are found to decrease parent involvement across all measures.”

Buckley’s findings are supported by my own research, published in my book *Catholic Schools: The Facts* (Americans for Religious Liberty, 2000).—ED

▼ At Virginia’s College of William and Mary (public since 1906), president Gene R. Nichol faces a firestorm over his decision to remove a cross from the college chapel. William and Mary, the nation’s second-oldest university, now serves a religiously diverse student body. Nichol wisely felt that the Christian cross should be displayed only on Sundays, or on request when Christian services were planned. He asked, does the chapel “belong to everyone, or is it principally for our Christian students?” Nichol’s dead right, but many in the college community aren’t having it. An online petition to restore the cross has more than ten thousand signatures; a physical petition making the rounds on campus bears the signatures of more than 1,100 students and alumni; and major donors have threatened to withdraw their support. In February, a now-disbarred graduate of the college’s law school filed suit to compel the college to restore the divisive Christian symbol. Stay tuned.—TF  

Love the Sinner, Hate the Sin?

Eric Reitan

Conservative Christians affirm both the traditional condemnation of homosexuality and the fundamental precept that we ought to love our neighbors as ourselves. They typically see no difficulty in maintaining both positions at once, holding that it is always possible to “love the sinner but hate the sin.” But are they right about that?

On the surface, it seems possible for someone with loving *motives* to condemn all homosexual sex. Many Christians sincerely believe that homosexuality is akin to alcoholism, involving self-destructive impulses that must be purged or restrained, and that, just as love for alcoholics requires a strong stand against the excessive alcohol consumption that is destroying their lives, so, too, does proper love of gays and lesbians require a strong moral stand against homosexuality.

But consider a different analogy: imagine a father who sincerely believes that it is sinful for his three-year-old son to play—that any play will plunge his child into ruin. And so, out of concern for his child’s welfare, he prohibits all play. As any child psychologist can tell you, the father’s behavior will radically undermine the child’s healthy development. If the father really does have loving motives, then his misguided beliefs are causing him to do things he would condemn were he to realize the truth. We can make a distinction here between loving *motives* and loving *acts*. Loving motives are the underlying impetuses, even when misguided, for loving acts that are the kind of acts that agents motivated by love *mean* to perform—

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but only if they are fully informed. At the very least, love, in the Christian sense, involves a commitment to the neighbor’s all-things-considered welfare, a commitment inconsistent with actions that inflict overall harm.

“If beliefs about what is best for gays and lesbians are formulated by appeal to a text or tradition whose content became fixed long before gays and lesbians had any public voice, then the actual experiences of gays and lesbians are decisively excluded from shaping judgments about what is best for them.”

There is a sharp disconnect—in our hypothetical father’s case—between what he *means* to do, and what he, in the abstract, *does*. But truly loving agents would, by virtue of their loving motives, want to avoid such a disconnect by avoiding relevant false beliefs. Put simply, if loving others involves a commitment to their welfare, then it involves a commitment to do one’s best to accu-

rately determine what that welfare consists in. As such, even if the father does not *in fact* know that his son is seriously harmed by the no-play policy, if he *should have known* based on the available evidence, then even his motives would be defective with respect to love.

In fact, it is hard to believe that our hypothetical father’s primary motivation really *is* love. A loving father would pay attention to his son. He would take his son’s experience seriously, especially with respect to his treatment of the boy. Were his son suffering, the father would try to discover why, in part, by asking for his son’s perspective. Unless some motive *other* than love is at play, it is hard to fathom any fully-informed father continuing to endorse the no-play policy.

Were we to learn that the father endorses this policy out of devotion to a self-professed guru who teaches it, we would likely conclude that he is motivated not by love for his son but by ideological allegiance. Love for others, we might say, demands that we form our beliefs about what is best for our loved ones by paying compassionate attention to their life experience. If we noticed that our choices were harming those others psychologically, this should surely be a reason to reconsider the propriety of such treatment.

The relevance of this question to the case of homosexuality should be clear. If the categorical condemnation of homosexuality is more like our hypothetical father’s prohibition on play than like a condemnation of alcohol abuse, then the “love the sinner, hate the sin” dictum won’t fly. Simply put, in some cases, it violates the ethic of love to assume that an act is sinful in the first place. Homosexual sex is just such a case.

To see why, we need to remember that conservative Christians condemn all homosexual sex, even in the context of loving monogamy. How does this condemnation affect gays and lesbians? One way to answer this question is to listen with sensitive attention to our gay and lesbian neighbors. Such attention focuses both on the life-stories of those who grew up surrounded by the condemnation of homosexuality and on the research of social and behavioral scientists, who’ve been engaged in unbiased observation of gays and lesbians for years.

What does this body of evidence tell us? It tells us that those with a homosexual orientation can find fulfilling sexual and romantic relationships only with members of the same sex and that gays and lesbians neither choose their sexual orientation nor have the power to effectively change it. This implies that when homosexual sex is condemned, gays and lesbians are left with no legitimate way to express their sexuality. When all expressions of it are viewed as wrong, the condemnation of homosexuality (unlike the condemnation of, say, adultery) extends beyond any discreet act to sexuality itself. Insofar as sexuality is an important part of their self-understanding, this condemnation covers not merely what gays and lesbians *do*, but who they *are*. Internalization of such condemnation, called “internalized homophobia,” is a common and natural consequence of immersion in a social context in which homosexuality is widely condemned. Research shows that such internalized homophobia has demonstrable negative effects on psychological health and has been correlated with increased suicide rates, especially among gay teens. At the same time, research shows that a homosexual orientation, as such, is not pathological.

Absent a climate of condemnation, then, gays and lesbians are as capable of happy, healthy lives as heterosexuals. But a climate of condemnation predictably generates suffering and alienation, and, in many cases, self-destructive pathology that occasionally rises to the level of suicidal despair. Thus, if we are to decide whether the traditional condemnation of homosexuality is a “loving one,” based on the observable effects that this condemnation has on gays and lesbians, we can only conclude that it is not.

But conservative Christians do not, of course, base their views on any such evidence, but rather on one or more of three things: the authority of a few biblical texts, the authority of church tradition, or the supposed implications of natural-law theory. It is beyond the scope of this essay to assess the strength of the arguments based on these foundations. Suffice it to say that they strike me as weak. For my purposes here, the question is whether it can be considered an expression of love toward gays and lesbians to ignore their experiences in favor of any of these foundations.

With respect to the authority of the Bible or church tradition, the answer seems clear. As with the father who pays more attention to his guru than to the experiences of his son, any allegiance to these authorities that trumps the lived experience of gays and lesbians seems to constitute an alternative to an ethic of love—an ethic of obedience to authority, perhaps. To say that these authorities teach us how to love our gay and lesbian neighbors only obscures the basic reality. How can we know this without consulting the effects of these teachings on gays and lesbians? If beliefs about what is best for gays and lesbians are formulated by appeal to a text or tradition whose content became fixed long before

“Sometimes, treating behavior as sinful creates insurmountable impediments to loving our neighbors properly.”

gays and lesbians had any public voice, then the actual experiences of gays and lesbians have been decisively excluded from shaping judgments about what is best for them. But this is to exclude what is, from the standpoint of anything that deserves the label “love,” the single most important thing of all.

Does the natural-law theory fare better? It might seem to at first glance. The natural law condemnation of homosexuality—which holds that using human sexual powers nonreproductively thwarts their natural purpose—needs to be understood in the context of Roman Catholic moral theology, which says that anything that violates a human being’s nature violates his or her dignity and is thereby unloving. Natural-law theory is meant, in part, to supplement the love ethic by offering a means of deciding what is loving by appeal to something

more solid than our neighbors’ subjective preferences, which—as in the case of the drug addict, for example—may prove unreliable.

But even if we grant that human dignity is best served by respecting human nature, there remains the question of how best to determine what accords with human nature. The fact is that gays and lesbians who affirm their sexuality typically live more healthy lives, with a greater sense of wholeness and integrity, than do those who reject it. This is not merely a matter of consulting the subjective preferences of gays and lesbians but of looking at how their lives go. By an overwhelming margin, those who cast aside the condemnation of homosexuality lead lives that more fully resemble—in terms of life satisfaction, participation in honest and healthy relationships, success in the development of their talents, etc.—the lives of those heterosexuals thought of as well-adjusted. The question is whether this evidence should carry more weight than the theoretic speculations concerning the purposes of our sexual powers expressed in the traditional natural-law argument. Here, again, an ethic of love would presumably prioritize the evidence drawn from attention to our neighbors.

Of course, conservative Christians will be quick to say that the true measure of human welfare is not psychological health as defined by the psychiatric community but one’s relationship with God. And, they will likely add, insofar as gays and lesbians defy God’s will, they are compromising that relationship. But Christians believe that God’s will is a *loving* will. Hence, God would prohibit homosexuality only if doing so could be considered “loving.” Thus, when conservative Christians appeal to a desire to bring gays and lesbians into a “right relationship with God,” they are begging the question at hand.

The conservative Christian’s quick appeal to the dictum “love the sinner, hate the sin” obscures a deep problem for traditional Christian ethics. Sometimes, treating behavior as sinful creates insurmountable impediments to loving our neighbors properly. Homosexuality appears to be such a case. Hence, Christians must either abandon the traditional condemnation of homosexuality—as denominations such as the United Church of Christ are doing—or truncate their allegiance to the “love” command. **ff**

A Painful Reality

Rick Heller

Why do absurd beliefs flourish in the United States? Sixty percent of Americans, for instance, “absolutely believe” that Jesus’s mother never had sex before giving birth to him, according to a 2003 Scripps-Howard poll. Theorists such as Daniel C. Dennett speculate that religion is a side effect of evolution and that brain developments that made our ancestors more fit also gave rise to a hunger to believe.

“A better understanding of how belief salves emotional pain might help us develop safer coping mechanisms.”

The way the central nervous system handles pain is consistent with this theory. Our internal pain system is highly responsive to expectations. Belief may be attractive because of its power to reduce sensitivity to pain.

Belief, in the form of the placebo effect, modulates pain in the brain, and, perhaps, even in the spinal cord. Though a 2001 paper by Danish researchers questioned whether a significant placebo effect exists, analyses have found three conditions that clearly respond to placebos: Parkinson’s disease, depression, and pain. Neural correlates of placebo analgesia—pain relief inspired by the intake of inert substances—have been identified in brain scans. One imaging study demonstrated that placebo-inspired beliefs activate opiates within the brain.

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In addition to modulating physical pain, studies indicate what common sense tells us: belief can ease *emotional* pain. Placebo-inspired beliefs reduce activity in the anterior cingulate, a part of the cerebral cortex associated with the agony of both physical and emotional pain.

Like physical pain, emotional pain is adaptive. When something causes pain, we stop doing it and we avoid doing it again. But sometimes life hurts, and there’s no easy escape. That’s when whiskey, narcotics, and religion come in handy. Each is a form of self-medication. Each has unpleasant side effects. A better understanding of how belief salves emotional pain might help us develop safer coping mechanisms.

Neuroscientists have identified two components of physical pain: “sensory” and “affective.” The sensory component is feeling in the body produced by nerve signals that register in the somatosensory cortex, a brain region that tracks the position and amplitude of a stimulus. The sensory component, however, lacks the insistent quality that forces us to pay attention to pain.

The anterior cingulate is responsible for pain’s urgent quality, called its “affective” component. “They used to do limbic leucotomies for pain, which is basically zapping the anterior cingulate,” said Alice Flaherty, a neurologist at Massachusetts General Hospital, referring to a form of lobotomy. “People would say, ‘I don’t care about the pain any more. I still feel it, but it’s not so obnoxious.’”

When we feel emotional pain, we experience the affective component of pain without the sensory one. Recent studies have shown that applying the word *pain* to emotional suffering is not just an apt metaphor but a correct neurological description. In these studies, scientists inflicted pain on volunteers (though not to a degree that alarmed university ethics committees). At UCLA,

Matthew Lieberman and colleagues inflicted emotional pain on volunteers while they were scanned by functional magnetic-resonance imaging (fMRI). Subjects played a computer game of “cyberball,” which simulated tossing a ball among three players. The other

“By accepting scientific theories like evolution, moderate religious groups may provide less emotional analgesia than denominations that insist that miracles have occurred in the past and will occur in the future.”

“players” turned nasty, tossing only to each other and excluding the player being scanned. Subjects who indicated that they were upset at the unfair treatment had significantly higher activity in the part of the anterior cingulate that also activated during physical pain.

Tania Singer and her colleagues at the University College of London found similar results when they recruited couples in loving relationships and gave them electric shocks. A partner’s brain would be scanned while observing the loved one being shocked—thereby monitoring emotional empathy for the physical pain of others. The results showed that emotional pain corresponded with the affective component of pain but not the sensory.

In addition, both the Lieberman and Singer studies found that emotional pain correlated with activation in the insula, a part of the brain that monitors the internal organs. (This seems to correspond with the sense of emotional unease we call having “gut feelings.” Since internal organs cannot directly sense the outside world, they are likely responding to brain activity.)

But how does belief reduce pain? Another study by Lieberman sheds light

on this. His collaborators inflicted physical pain on subjects being scanned with positron-emission tomography (PET). People with irritable-bowel syndrome were twice subjected to a colonoscopy-like procedure. The first time, they did not receive real or even sham medica-

“A certain amount of faith can make us feel better. Excessive enthusiasm can lead to spectacular failure when an expected miracle does not arrive.”

tion. For the next three weeks, they were given a placebo that supposedly treated irritable-bowel syndrome and were asked to keep a pain diary in which they rated their symptoms on a numeric scale. They then went through the rectal procedure and scan once again. Pain relief over the course of placebo treatment correlated with reduced activity in a subject’s anterior cingulate. It also correlated with increased activity in the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex. This area of the brain, according to Lieberman, is involved when we mentally override habitual behavior.

Jon-Kar Zubieta and colleagues at the University of Michigan inflicted muscular pain on volunteers, treated the pain with placebos, and scanned the subjects with PET. They detected increased neurotransmission of internal opiates in parts of the anterior cingulate among those who experienced placebo pain relief. The results were consistent with older studies that found that naloxone, an antidote for narcotics, also blocks placebo analgesia.

In a phone interview, Lieberman said, “The placebo effect doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with the pill whatsoever. It has more to do with expectation, belief, and also condition-

ing.” In various studies of the placebo effect, the deceptions used to inspire belief have included inert creams, saline injections, sham surgery, and even magnets. As far as why our pain system responds to belief, Lieberman suggests that it may be adaptive to inhibit pain at times, such as when fleeing from a predator.

If belief in a placebo stimulates opioid transmission and reduces activity in the anterior cingulate, and if anterior-cingulate activity correlates with the unpleasantness of both physical and emotional pain, could placebo analgesia reduce emotional pain? I put this to Lieberman. “Yes,” he said, “that seems like a very plausible claim, although untested.” When Marx called religion the opiate of the masses, was he *literally* correct?

Religion cannot be reduced to emotional analgesia, but it’s a key selling point. The first of Buddha’s Four Noble Truths is translated as “Life is suffering.” Buddhists even distinguish between pain and suffering in a manner that parallels the distinction between sensory and affective. One insightful teaching is that pain accepted without alarm causes little suffering.

Christianity is focused on pain. Most religions boast of a powerful god, but the crucified god of Christian myth has a counterintuitive appeal to individuals in pain. The death of loved ones, of course, is a great source of emotional pain; expecting to reunite with them in the hereafter modulates pain in the here and now. This analgesic property of Christian faith is expressed in a saying attributed to the apostle Paul: “We grieve but not as others do who have no hope.”

To the extent that a religion generates placebo effects, it provides real relief from suffering. It is belief itself—not supernatural power—that provides the pain relief. It’s perfectly understandable that people turn to faith in times of stress.

Among American Christians, the once-dominant mainline denominations have hemorrhaged members while evangelical, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal denominations have gained adherents. By accepting scientific theories like evolution, moderate religious groups may provide less emotional analgesia than denominations that insist that miracles have occurred in the past and will occur in the future.

Escapist religious fantasies succeed in the marketplace of emotions, but they have a downside, of course. A certain amount of faith can make us feel better. Excessive enthusiasm can lead to spectacular failure when an expected miracle does not arrive. The religions that survive for generations find a way to temper expectations.

Is there a rational alternative to religion that could harness the placebo’s power over physical and emotional pain? That’s debatable. Any pharmaceutical that stimulates the internal opiate system is likely to be addictive and, therefore, a source of future social pain. The placebo works not just through belief but through deception. As Matthew Lieberman told me, “Self-deception doesn’t work if you know you’re doing it.” **f i**

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Another Holy Horror: The Cristero War

James A. Haught

In the vast annals of faith-based killing, some episodes are widely known, while other religious bloodbaths are oddly forgotten.

The whole world is aware of the stunning “martyr” attack of September 11, 2001. And most people recall the Jonestown tragedy and the Waco siege—as well as historic horrors such as the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, the Crusades, the Reformation wars, the pogroms against Jews, the era of human sacrifice, and numerous others.

However, some faith-driven tragedies have mostly vanished from public awareness. For example, few Americans know that Catholic-Protestant strife caused a cannon battle in the streets of Philadelphia in 1844 or that the Taiping Rebellion—led by a mystic who said he was God’s second son after Jesus with a divine mandate to “destroy demons”—killed millions of Chinese in the 1850s.

Here’s another half-forgotten holy horror: the Cristero War, which killed ninety thousand Mexicans in the 1920s. It was a long, convoluted, gruesome conflict that spanned a century. It was a classic example of the age-old struggle between reformers and a priestly class that gains power in a society, entrenches itself with rulers, and lives off the populace, while imposing strictures on them.

The Cristero War showed the power of religion to propel believers into bloodshed. And it showed that attempts to suppress religion by law can trigger violent blowback.

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After Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821, democracy advocates sought to loosen the Roman Catholic Church’s grip on Mexican society. Some anticlerical laws were passed, but they were revoked by the dictator Santa Anna in 1834.

In the 1850s, liberal Benito Juarez, a Zapotec Indian, came to power and enacted *La Reforma*, a sweeping plan for secular democracy. Among various other reforms, the plan ended Catholicism’s exclusive role as the state religion, reduced the church’s great land wealth, halted ecclesiastical courts, abolished church burial fees, and revoked priestly control of education, marriage, and other facets of daily life.

The changes were written into a new constitution—but the church excommunicated all Mexican officials who swore to uphold it. Civil war erupted, and religious conservatives seized Mexico City, driving the liberal government to Veracruz. The United States supported Juarez, and his regime defeated the rebels in 1861.

Exiled Mexican conservatives appealed to Catholic France and Spain and the pope, among other Europeans. French, Spanish, and some English forces invaded Mexico, driving Juarez to the north. A Hapsburg noble, Maximilian, was installed as emperor—but he was slow to revoke the anticlerical laws. The clergy and the pope’s emissary felt betrayed, and Europeans withdrew their military backing. Juarez regrouped, defeated Maximilian’s militia, and executed the emperor in 1867.

After Juarez died, successors added further separations between church and state. Religious oaths were banned in courts. Church ownership of land was forbidden. But dictator Porfirio Diaz seized power in an 1876 revolt, and gradually restored Catholic privileges during his long reign.

After 1900, young radicals began calling for the overthrow of Diaz, as well as the distribution of land to peasants and abolition of priestly power. Their unrest finally exploded in the Mexican Revolution, which raged from 1910 to 1916. The victorious reformers then drafted a 1917 constitution mandating democracy—and imposing tough limits on the clergy. It halted church control of schools, banned monastic orders, and eliminated religious processions and outdoor masses. It again put limits on church ownership of property, and it forbade priests to wear clerical garb, vote, or comment on public affairs in the press.

At first, this strong crackdown was only lightly enforced, and church protests were subdued. But, in 1926, President Plutarco Calles intensified the pressure. He decreed a huge fine (equal to US\$250 at the time) on any priest who wore a clerical collar and demanded five years in prison for any priest who criticized the government. In response, Catholic bishops called for a boycott against the government. Catholic teachers refused to show up at secular schools, Catholics refused to ride public transportation, and other acts of civil disobedience occurred. The pope in Rome approved the resistance. The government reacted by closing churches. Ferment grew.

On July 31, 1926, the bishops halted all worship services in Mexico. An ardent Catholic Web site, The Angelus, says the step was unprecedented in Catholic history and presumably was “intended to push the Mexicans to revolt.” Intended or not, it worked.

On August 23, 1926, about four hundred armed Catholics barricaded themselves in a Guadalajara church and fought a gun battle with federal troops, costing eighteen lives. The following day, soldiers stormed a Sahuayo church, killing its priest and vicar.

Catholic rebellions erupted in numerous places. Rene Garza, leader of the Mexican Association of Catholic Youth, called for general insurrection, declaring that “the hour of victory belongs to God.” Volunteer bands attacked federal facilities and army posts, shouting “Long live Christ the king! Long live the Virgin of Guadalupe!” The rebels called themselves *Cristeros*—fighters for Christ. Mexican bishops refused to oppose the rebellion and even quietly approved it.

Two priests became guerrilla commanders. One, Aristeo Pedroza, was prim and moral. The other, Jose Vega, was a drinker and womanizer. Three other priests became gunfighters; many others became covert activists.

Father Vega led a raid on a train, and his brother was killed in the attack. In revenge, the priest had the train cars doused with gasoline and torched, killing fifty-one civilian passengers inside. The massacre soured public support for the uprising. The government expelled Catholic bishops from the country. After another engagement, Vega ordered all federal troops who were taken prisoner stabbed to death, to save ammunition. The priest was later killed in a raid.

An estimated fifty thousand Catholic men became guerrillas, and thousands of Catholic women joined "St. Joan of Arc" support brigades. The rebels began de-

feating federal units and came to control large sections of Mexico. Some Catholic army officers mutinied on behalf of the religious insurgents. The U.S. ambassador to Mexico launched negotiations to end the conflict. His effort was damaged, however, because President Calles was scheduled to be succeeded by moderate president-elect Alvaro Obregon—but Obregon was assassinated by a Catholic fanatic. Eventually, talks brought a cease fire. The Catholic Church was allowed to keep its buildings, and priests were allowed to live in them.

The Cristero War took about ninety thousand lives: 56,882 on the government side, and some thirty thousand Cristeros, plus civilians. On May 21, 2000, the Vatican conferred sainthood on twenty-three Cristero figures: twenty priests and three laymen. (Normally, each canonization requires evidence of at least two miracles, but the church

lowers that standard for "martyrs," so the number of proclaimed miracles in the Cristero War may be less than forty-six.) On November 20, 2005, thirteen others were designated martyrs and beatified, advancing toward sainthood. On the government side, no glories were proclaimed for those who struggled and won at least a partial victory against domination by the clergy.

For freethinkers, the message of the Cristero War is clear: religion is dangerous and laced with the potential for violence (as evidenced by the deadly 2006 Muslim eruptions over Danish cartoons of the Prophet). Overpowering governmental attempts to subdue it can impel believers into irrational slaughter. A wiser course is to maintain separation of church and state, patiently waiting for advances in education and science to erode public support for supernaturalism. **ff**



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A Lesson from Marco Polo

John A. Frantz

From Marco Polo's writings, I learned that, in most religions other than Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, deities enjoyed at that time only regional jurisdiction. Tribe A's god might reign on one side of a mountain pass; Tribe B's god on the other. Travelers who understood this, and made a point to learn something of the local culture and customs as they journeyed, were more likely to be well-received—and to survive to recount their adventures.

Marco Polo's father and uncle were Venetians who traveled to China from 1261 to 1268 but left no record of their experiences. When they undertook a new journey in 1271, they brought seventeen-year-old Marco along. Marco kept extensive notes, including descriptions of the cultures and customs of the lands through which they passed. During my family's own sojourn in Afghanistan, from 1968–1970, our route intersected that of the Polos at several points. “Rubbing elbows” with Marco Polo in Asia may explain my special fascination with his accomplishments, as exceptional in his time as space travel is in ours.

The insight about deities having only local or regional jurisdiction was implicit in Marco Polo's observations of the various cultures encountered in his travels, although not explicitly stated anywhere in the book, *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Still, it is a powerful concept. Among other things, it explains why the vast majority of the world's religions do not proselytize. In Afghanistan,

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we were impressed by the knowledge among the Muslims we met that Islam is an outgrowth of Judaism and Christianity. Proselytizing became a matter of social consciousness to inform the heathen of “the one true religion.” It was humbling to realize that the Muslims credit Christians and Jews, their fellow “Peoples of the Book,” as being less heathen than other nonbelievers, though most Jews and Christians scarcely return the favor.

Why do Jews not proselytize? In his book *The Thirteenth Tribe*, Arthur Koestler reminds us that Jews once proselytized vigorously, ceasing to do so only at the insistence of the Romans—and Christians, in more modern times. (Though Koestler's thesis in his book is controversial, he seems a reliable enough source in this matter.) In any case, the three Western monotheistic religions agree that Jehovah, God the Father, and Allah are different names for the same God. Yet each religion contains—and, at varying times, has acted upon—a supposed commandment to proselytize the others.

Marco Polo's insight about the limited regional jurisdiction of other deities reminds me of something that, sadly, many Muslims and Christians have yet

“ . . . monotheism has carried our human model of tribalism to excess.”

to figure out. Despite the perceived mandate to proselytize, a just and merciful God would not send a heathen to hell merely because missionaries had been lazy or absent.

This illogical mandate to proselytize stands as an unintended consequence of monotheism, because only the Western monotheisms claimed universal jurisdiction and because of the received instruction from the one true God to proselytize. I remember hearing Christians allow that heathens who had never heard the true word might be spared from hellfire. This has a very troublesome implication: that heathens who heard the word from a less-than-optimally charismatic missionary might be harmed because they heard the word but were not convinced to convert—better not to hear the word at all than to hear it preached clumsily! It follows that appropriate humility disqualifies most of us as missionaries.

We are then left with the question: Is distrust of human beings who are not sufficiently like ourselves inborn? The answer is, “Probably so,” which brings about tribalism (a strong cultural or ethnic identity that separates us from members of another cultural or ethnic group). Did we come by this naturally? Jane Goodall, who studied chimpanzees in the wild for more than a decade, now has an orphanage for chimpanzees whose mothers have been killed by poachers. She is unable to release them into the wild, because wild chimpanzees attempt to kill any strange members of their own species. Goodall keeps her wards in plain sight of the local villagers, many of whom have decided that the chimps are so like humans that they will no longer eat them. Is our tribalism, indeed, less

extreme than that of chimpanzees? Ever since the Chinese invented gunpowder, humankind has desperately needed to become one tribe that accepts a diversity of religious beliefs. Separation of church and state, which helps foster this diversity, may have been our greatest invention since settled agriculture.

“My experience in Asia tells me that education helps us to transcend sectarianism and its mirror image, tribalism—and also that medicine crosses cultural barriers more readily than most other human activities.”



The idea of a just and merciful God not sending the heathen to hell because of lazy or absent missionaries is my own, acquired in mid-childhood from two ecclesiastically trained parents and many missionaries on home leave who were entertained in our household through the years. I knew that the idea would not play in Peoria, so I have rarely mentioned it.

Now, let me offer a more somber interpretation: monotheism has carried our human model of tribalism to excess. A reflection on the history of religious warfare tells us to look at what we have in common with strangers, especially if we are far from our natal groups (as Marco Polo was). When you are among Islamic strangers, strive to be labeled as a guest—cordial treatment of guests is literally an Islamic sacrament.

Another humbling cross-cultural insight: Christian missionaries' success in India was severely blunted by Hindu leaders, who, in all sincerity, told their people: “A great man has come from afar to tell us of a new path to God. Let us listen carefully.” Hindus believe that all religions contain some truth and that Hinduism encompasses it all. Why should they want to convert to some small portion of the whole they already practice?

My experience in Asia tells me that education helps us to transcend sectarianism and its mirror image, tribalism—and also that medicine crosses cultural

barriers more readily than most other human enterprises. Could an “intelligently designed” religion contain a logical inconsistency such as I have been

discussing? The obvious conclusion is that the monotheistic religions are at least partially products of the human mind.  

On Seeing a Photo of Myself Taken Thirty Years Ago

Richard S. Bank

Mounted on the Inca highway on the way
to the ruins of San Miguel,
staring into the camera, bearded; effusive,
as if I will be that way forever.

When I am there, the morning sun glares
off the white, crumpled-paper peaks
of the Andes and hurts my eyes.

This photo is a touchstone, to see
if I follow the harmonious way through
existence in the changing natural world.
How can I do anything but rejoice
with my happy brothers in the dust.

Richard S. Bank is an attorney practicing in Philadelphia, an adjunct professor of law at Villanova University Law School, and a High Adventure hiker and canoeist. He won an International Merit in Poetry Award from the Atlantic Literary Review, honorable mentions in both the Mary Scheirman poetry competition and the Poets Attic poetry contest, and was selected as one of the best poets in the Delaware Valley by Seven Arts Magazine. He has a CD and chapbook, Some of the Secrets.

Most recently, his work has appeared in The Paterson Literary Review, The Mad Poets Review, Sea Change, The Schuylkill Valley Journal, Siren's Silence, One Trick Pony, the Legal Studies Forum, Lyric, and Up and Under. His work is forthcoming in The Barefoot Muse and has also been anthologized in Off the Record, a volume of poetry by lawyers.

The Jesus Project

CSER's Historical Inquiry

R. Joseph Hoffmann

Sometimes, jokes mirror reality. Here's one that circulated through the halls of Harvard Divinity School in 1976. It's about the famous New Testament theologian Rudolph Bultmann, called (wrongly) the father of "demythologizing" Scripture.

The scene is Jerusalem in 1947. A team of Vatican archeologists discovers a burial site close to Golgotha, the "place of the skull," where Jesus was supposedly crucified. Among fragments of ossuary and skeletal remains, they find a crudely engraved rectangular tablet, worn thin by the centuries but still bearing an easy-to-read inscription in Greek: "Here we have laid the body of our master, Jesus the Nazarene, the one we thought was the messiah."

A junior member of the team races into the city, places a call to Rome, and manages to speak to the pope's secretary. A moment later, the pope comes on the line: "Are you certain?" asks the pope. "Might it not be a hoax?"

"No hoax, your Holiness," says the archeologist. "Soon the news will go all around the world—the Arab students digging with us will not be able to keep this quiet."

The pope thinks for a moment, then, in a tone of resignation, tells his secretary to phone Professor Rudolph Bultmann in his office at the University of Marburg. "Are you sure, your Holiness? The Protestants have quite as much to lose from this discovery as we do." But the secretary relents, and a moment later, Pius XII is speaking to Bultmann.

"So," says the pope, "I'm afraid I

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must give you some bad news, professor. We have today discovered outside Jerusalem the site of what is almost certainly the burial place and the remains of our Lord and Savior, Jesus of Nazareth."

The pause is long. Then Bultmann says, chuckling: "You mean he really existed?"

How hard we laugh at this joke depends a little on what we know of the history that makes it funny. The idea that the life of Jesus is basically a concoction of ancient religious myths, some Jewish and some not, goes back as far as the eighteenth century, when Hermann Samuel Reimarus penned his famous but now nonexistent *Apologia*. Reimarus was no atheist, but his attack on the Gospels was scathing. He denied not only the "super-naturalistic" elements of the Gospels, already crumbling under the weight of Unitarian and deist critiques, but also that any revealed religion *could* possess a universal meaning or count as a compendium for ethics and morality. Christianity, in particular, could not be the universal religion because many of its truths were unintelligible to reasonable men: "It abounds in error as to matters of fact, contradicts human experience, reason and morals, and is one tissue of folly, deceit, enthusiasm, selfishness and crime," Reimarus wrote. "The design of the writers of the New Testament, as well as that of Jesus, was not to teach true rational religion, but to serve their own selfish ambitions, in promoting which they exhibit an amazing combination of conscious fraud and enthusiasm."

By 1835, one of Reimarus's greatest antagonists, David Friedrich Strauss, published his distinguished *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* (*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*), which earned Strauss the nickname "Iscariot"

among members of German theological faculties. For Strauss, the Gospels were "mytho-poetic," driven by the religious needs of a primitive religious community that had no interest in producing a biography of Jesus. If there was a Jesus of history, Strauss finally came to think (*The Old Faith and the New*, 1872), he was a fanatic whose prophecies were mistaken, whose death was unexpected, and whose failed mission was followed by mass hallucinations, Elvis-style, among followers who had fallen into depression and deep denial—outcomes that the Gospels record as "appearances" of a risen Jesus. For Strauss, a century of biblical criticism had brought to an end the "Christian era" as Europe had once known it: "We can no longer believe in this absurd nonsense," he wrote. "My conviction is, if we were to speak as honest and upright men, we are no longer Christians."

If Strauss raised the question of the historicity of a Jesus buried beneath blankets of wishful theological thinking, it took another Hegelian, Bruno Bauer, to tease out the implications of radical criticism. Bauer was deprived of his teaching post at Bonn in 1842 for arguing that the original Gospel was the work of a single author who lived during the reign of Hadrian (117–138 C.E.). Confessing in 1852 that he had lost confidence in his original aim of separating the "person of Jesus from the inanity to which the evangelists had reduced it," Bauer challenged even the authorship of the four "great epistles" of Paul—the ones left standing even after the most severe critical techniques had been applied to the text: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians. By this time, Bauer pointed forward to the beginning of the so-called thoroughgoing skeptical hypothesis: the theory that Jesus of Nazareth was the creation of a religious community in search of its ideal savior and redeemer and that the historical person, Jesus of Nazareth, had never lived.

Following Schweitzer's inimitable survey of the "life of Jesus"-research (*Von Reimarus zu Wrede*, 1906), theological scholarship effectively suppressed the radical hypothesis of German and Dutch radicals—the "myth theorists"—who followed in Bauer's

footsteps. A quiet exception was the Bremen pastor and scholar Albert Kalthoff, who bravely suggested in 1902 that *either* Jesus of Nazareth never lived or, if he did, he had been but one of dozens of Jewish messianic figures engaged in preaching God's judgment to his generation—yet another in the dull list of failed messiahs. Whatever the case, the story of Jesus as it stands today is the story of how an image of “the Christ” came into being, Kalthoff argued, a biography of the community and not of Jesus. Furthermore, Kalthoff challenged the by-then-familiar Protestant approach to “doing” history, which obliged the scholar-theologian to assume “an original pure principle” (the historical Jesus) and “an immediate declension from it” in the form of the early Church. Kalthoff's notion that the Church cannot be separated from the earliest image of Jesus—indeed, that it was the Church that *drew* the picture in the first place—was deadly for the way New Testament scholarship was used to doing business, and still does business. The title of a standard text by Boston University Professor Paul Frederickson reflects this: *From Jesus to Christ*—the former a real, historical individual, the latter a product of the Church, the maker of legends that disguise the particulars of his identity, message, and worldview.

The so-called nonhistoricity theories included a number of interesting and absurd attempts to locate the “master myth” behind the New Testament documents. But these would be overshadowed by other developments in New Testament studies at the start of the twentieth century. Especially influential were the various quests for the historical Jesus, beginning with Schweitzer's indictment of the Gospels as “dogmatic history.” Nevertheless, on his view, they still served as history enough for one to read out of them the biography of a messianic, apocalyptic preacher who believed the world and its inhabitants stood under the verdict of a God sickened by sin and ready to bring the dome of heaven crashing down on unrepentant heads. This “eschatological world view,” Schweitzer believed, was so strange to modern consciousness that Jesus himself would seem alien to us if he reappeared. Christianity had lost sight of the apocalyptic worldview and so had lost touch with the Jesus of history. “The whole history of Christianity

down to the present day,” he wrote, “the real history of it, is based on the delay of the parousia [second coming], the non-occurrence of the parousia, the abandonment of eschatology, and the progress and completion of the deschatologizing of religion.” Yet, Schweitzer and his successors, however radical their views, remained firmly established in their belief that an historical figure stood at the beginning of the process: after all, it had been *his* views that were wrong, his prophecies that had gone unfulfilled. It was as though the only way to explain the origins of Christianity was to believe in a Jesus who had been sadly mistaken, and for that one needs to postulate a mistake-maker.

“The Jesus Seminar was famous for all the wrong reasons—its voting method (marbles), the reductionist and sometimes posturing aims of its members, the public style of its meetings, even its openly defiant stance against the claims of miracles in the Gospels—including the resurrection of Jesus.”

By mid-century, Rudolph Bultmann was tacitly accepting the “disjunction” between the “Jesus of history” and the “Church's Christ” (a piece of theological jargon on the lips of every first-year divinity student by the 1940s). Many of the Bultmannians who succeeded their master, such as Ernest Kaesemann and James Robinson (the American editor of the Coptic Gnostic gospels from Upper Egypt)—clung with equal firmness to the “bare datum of Jesus' historical existence,” though for reasons often expressed in contradictory terms. Between 1945 and the birth of the new millennium, the energy and enterprise of New Testament studies was chiefly devoted to Kaesemann's challenge: enlarging the data of the life of Jesus to include information that might

shed light on the contours and context of an historical existence.

The new quests with their new questions were helped, hindered, sensationalized, and ultimately dead-ended by the promise of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls from Khirbet Qumran in 1947 and the Nag Hammadi materials (the Gnostic gospels), discovered in 1945. From these we learned that Christianity was a complex phenomenon, religiously; that so-called orthodox Christianity emerged as one option among many possible religious outcomes in the toss and pitch of Palestinian syncretism; that the books of the New Testament were canonized (i.e., recognized by important bishops) not because of their internal rectitude or accuracy but in an effort to put a stop to the factory-style production of gospels, letters, apocalypses, and assorted other writings—in short, that the canonical Jesus was the solution to the crisis of the proliferation of Jesuses, which the church father Irenaeus compared to “so many mushrooms sprouting up everywhere” in the garden of God. For those taught to believe Christianity was a lone star shining in the black sky of a pagan night, the possibility that it was really one point of light among thousands of both larger and smaller stars was potentially devastating—especially to Christian exclusivists who believed in a Jesus who claimed to be the way, the truth, and the light of life. For the historically inclined and the merely curious, these new materials represented an overdue repast after years of starvation, and they approached the possibility of rethinking and reconfiguring Jesus like Klondike speculators frantic to stake a claim.

It is pointless to list the dog's breakfast of Jesuses that came from these quests—the magician, cynic, rabbi, outcast, peasant, bandit, revolutionary, prophet—and the combination of any two of the above. As John Dominic Crossan diagnosed in 1991, having produced his own minority opinion concerning Jesus, “It seems we can have as many Jesuses as there are exegetes . . . exhibiting a stunning diversity that is an academic embarrassment.” But Crossan's caveat had been expressed more elegantly a hundred years before by the German scholar Martin Kaehler: “The entire life of Jesus movement,” he argued, was based on misperceptions “and is bound to end in a blind alley . . .

Christian faith and the history of Jesus repel each other like oil and water.”

Given the outlawing of the question of the historical Jesus, it is hardly surprising that the so-called Jesus Seminar (founded in 1985) came into being without seriously questioning the existence of its subject. The Seminar practiced a theologically driven sort of history, heavily tinctured by the politics of scholars who had come of age in the late twentieth century. This looked radical to evangelicals and fundamentalists, courageous to liberal Christians and skeptics. Both the anxiety and the appreciation were misplaced. In the end, the Seminar simply turned the historical Jesus into a clay figure whose size was determined by the various contexts the members imposed on him. At its peak in 2000, associates of the Seminar had produced useful studies of Q, the so-called sayings gospel underlying the canonical Matthew and Luke; attempted a latter-day enshrinement of the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas (thought by some to be as old as versions of the canonical gospels); and tried to establish a “core” of Jesus’ sayings based on established critical procedures that emphasized skepticism in the acceptance of any given passage or saying.

By the end of their most visible period in 2000, the members had pared the sayings of Jesus down to 18 percent of those attributed to him in the New Testament and pictured him as a wandering teacher of “wisdom” who preached in riddles and parables about a God of love who preferred sinners to the wealthy, comfortable, and wise of the world. Gone, by and large, was the utterly mistaken eschatological prophet who preached the end of the world and never expected to found a church—much less a seminar—in his name.

The Jesus Seminar was famous for all the wrong reasons—its voting method (marbles), the reductionist and sometimes posturing aims of its members, the public style of its meetings, even its openly defiant stance against the claims of miracles in the Gospels—including the resurrection of Jesus. Except for the marbles and the members, none of this was new. The use of additional sources to create fewer sayings and the use of context as though it provided content were at least innovative. But the Jesus who emerged from these scholarly travails was so diminished that—as I wrote in a

FREE INQUIRY article in 1993—he could not exist apart from his makers: “The Jesus of the Westar project is a talking doll with a questionable repertoire of thirty-one sayings. Pull a string and he blesses the poor.”

What the Seminar had tacitly acknowledged without acknowledging the corollary is that over 80 percent of “Jesus” had been fictionalized by the Gospel writers. That is to say that, if we are to judge a man’s life by his sayings, the greater portion of the literary artifacts known as the Gospels is fictional. If we are to judge by actions, then what actions survived historical criticism? Not the virgin birth, the Transfiguration, the healing of the sick, the purely magi-


“We believe in assessing the quality of the evidence available for looking at this question *before* seeing what the evidence has to tell us.”

cal feats like in Cana, or the multiplication of loaves and fishes. The Resurrection had quietly been sent to the attic by theologians in the nineteenth century. The deeds—except, perhaps, the attack on the Temple (Mark 11:15–19)—had preceded the words to the dustbin years before, yet scholars insisted the historical figure was untouched. Only faith could explain this invulnerability to harm.

On a pleasant day in January 2007, at the University of California, Davis, the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion (CSER) asked the question that had been in quest of a serious answer for over a hundred years: Did Jesus exist? The CSER fellows, invited guests, present and former members of the Jesus Seminar, and a wide variety of interested and engaged attendees applauded roundly after three days of lectures and discussions on the subject—appropriately—“Scripture and Skepticism.” The Jesus Project, as CSER has named the new effort, is the

first methodologically agnostic approach to the question of Jesus’ historical existence. But we are not neutral, let alone willfully ambiguous, about the objectives of the project itself. We believe in assessing the quality of the evidence available for looking at this question *before* seeing what the evidence has to tell us. We do not believe the task is to produce a “plausible” portrait of Jesus prior to considering the motives and goals of the Gospel writers in telling his story. We think the history and culture of the times provide many significant clues about the character of figures similar to Jesus. We believe the mixing of theological motives and historical inquiry is impermissible. We regard previous attempts to rule the question out of court as vestiges of a time when the Church controlled the boundaries of permissible inquiry into its sacred books. More directly, we regard the question of the historical Jesus as a testable hypothesis, and we are committed to no prior conclusions about the outcome of our inquiry. This is a statement of our principles, and we intend to stick to them.

The Jesus Project will run for five years, with its first session scheduled for December 2007. It will meet twice a year, and, like its predecessor, the Jesus Seminar, it will hold open meetings. Unlike the Seminar, the Project members will not vote with marbles, and we will not expand membership indefinitely: the Project will be limited to fifty scholars with credentials in biblical studies as well as in the crucial cognate disciplines of ancient history, mythography, archeology, classical studies, anthropology, and social history.

At the end of its lease, the Jesus Project will publish its findings. Those findings will not be construed as sensational or alarming; like all good history, the project is aiming at a probable reconstruction of the events that explain the beginning of Christianity—a man named Jesus from the province of Galilee whose life served as the basis for the beginning of a movement, or a sequence of events that led to the Jesus story being propagated throughout the Mediterranean. We find both conclusions worthy of contemplation, but as we live in the real world—of real causes and outcomes—only one can be true. Our aim, like Pilate’s (John 18:38), is to find the truth. 

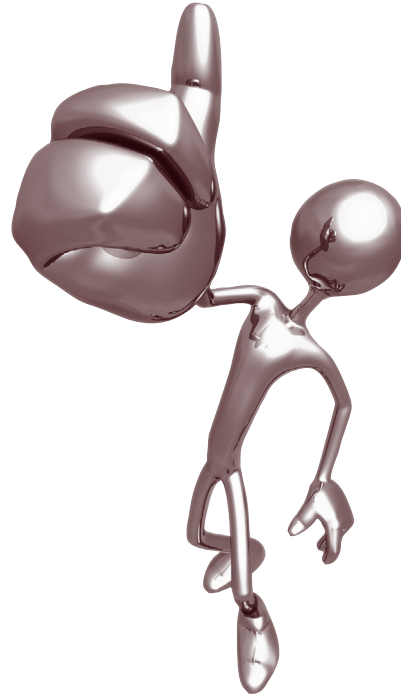
Positive Atheism in India

Bill Cooke

One normally wouldn't think of the city of Vijayawada in the Andhra Pradesh state of India as a hotbed of world atheism, but it is. That is because the Atheist Centre, founded by Gora (1902–1975) and his wife, Saraswathi Gora (1912–2006), has been based there since 1947.

Vijayawada is not an easy place to get to. Its airport only operates local flights, and most people come in by rail. This is never less than a six-hour journey, whether from Vishakhapatnam in the north, Hyderabad in the west, or Chennai in the south. Failing that, one can play Russian roulette with one's life and hire a taxi from any of these places and be driven in. Vijayawada is a nowhere-in-particular place that swelters in India's hottest state. But after one visits any of the bigger cities, the lesser bustle of this small city (only about one and half million people) is something of a relief. And the pressures of the journey somehow add to the joy of reaching Vijayawada and embarking on three days of frenetic conference activity, as I did in January.

The Atheist Centre is one of the more remarkable freethought institutions in the world. Its long track record of service in humanist social and educational work has earned it the goodwill of the state government and other nongovernmental organizations, and it can always attract senior public figures to its events. The Sixth World Atheist Conference, held in January, was no exception. The valedictory address was given by P.M. Bhargava, the vice chairman of the National Knowledge Commission of India. India's booming economy is fueled by the knowledge explosion that official commissions such as that one are charged with encouraging. Another important guest was Innaiiah Nariseti, the executive director of the Center for



Inquiry/India, based in Hyderabad. There were senior people from the International Humanist and Ethical Union and from the Norwegian, Finnish, German, British, and New Zealand movements.

Over the three days' proceedings, a tremendous range of views were expressed to an audience of between three hundred and one thousand people, depending on who was speaking and the time of day. I spent most of the three days on the dais, under the harsh glare of the television lamps. The session I chaired was on "Facets of Atheism," and it included speakers on the prevalence of witchcraft and sorcery in India and the need for an atheist outlook as part of people's emancipation from superstition. Other sessions were on "Youth, Atheism, and Humanism," "Atheism and Humanism in Action," "Humanism and Atheism and Human Rights," and "Atheism as a Way of Life."

A high point of any Atheist Centre conference is the evening cultural program. Demos Gora led a dance drama called *Samatha Jyothi*. In this six-scene

dance, Religion, Region, and Caste each does its bit to spread discord among the peoples of the earth, but *Samata* ("Secularism") is eventually able to fend off these threats and lead the final dance of the united global family. To see a concept like secularism rendered in dance is truly a special experience.

"The Atheist Centre is one of the more remarkable freethought institutions in the world."

Another feature of Indian conferences is the attention given to guru-busting. Indian villages are awash with god-men who, for a fee, will perform "magic" to protect the village and its crops and children. But there is always the accompanying threat that failure to reward them sufficiently generously will result in misery, hunger, and death. Not surprisingly, god-men often double as criminals. Narendra Naik, a biochemist, told of the work he has done over many years to educate villagers about the ways of god-men. Their tricks are all so simple and easily replicated, and he performed all of them for us. Professor Naik showed gruesome footage of people who have been burned alive for supposed witchcraft. Tell that to the next person who puts *superstition* in scare quotes.

Low printing costs in India mean that the conference can put out a comprehensive publication. True to form, the publication for this conference ran to about two hundred pages. It was full of advertising from local businesses happy to be featured in an Atheist Centre publication. The press covered the conference fully and accurately.

What's so special about the Atheist Centre? Without doubt, it is the range of practical, humanistic social programs it runs. Every week, a free, public lecture on aspects of medical knowledge and hygiene is given. This is widely reported in the Telugu-language press. Samarana, a doctor at one of the local hospitals, has written a large number of pamphlet-sized works on aspects of health, sex, and hygiene. In this way,

knowledge of medicine and hygiene is disseminated through society. The Atheist Centre also trains nurses, who then go back to their home villages and improve conditions there. Another program is its hostel for girls who have been abandoned or abused. Some of these girls later train as nurses. Others receive at least an elementary education. There is a large lecture hall with all sorts of devices specially built to illustrate various scientific laws and principles.

Then, there are the three satellite organizations that cater to various social problems. Arthik Samata Mandal, or the Association for Economic Equality, operates in villages throughout Andhra Pradesh, giving medical and family planning assistance and providing disaster relief. Vasavya Mahila Mandal concentrates on

education, social awareness, and health issues for women and disadvantaged youth. The most recent is Samskar, which is involved mainly with the rehabilitation of criminals.

“What’s so special about the Atheist Centre? Without doubt, it is the range of practical, humanistic social programs it runs.”

The world has heard so much of the supposedly saintly work among the poor of India by Mother Teresa, even though her organization does very little relief

work, being focused on conversion rather than cure. But of an organization that really does do valuable work, like the Atheist Centre, the world hears nothing. The injustice of this is gut-wrenching. For more on this, see my review of Aroup Chatterjee’s excellent book *Mother Teresa: The Final Verdict* (Kolkata: Meteor, 2003) in *FREE INQUIRY*, October/November 2004 (vol. 24, no. 6), pp. 54–55.

It is always a pleasure to visit Vijayawada and see practical humanism arising out of a positive atheism. **fb**

Bill Cooke is Asia-Pacific Coordinator for the Center for Inquiry/Transnational and the author of the Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism, and Humanism.

Scoutmaster’s Report VIII: Becoming Part of It

Hickory Run State Park, May 2003

Richard S. Bank

The mountains, I become part of it.
The herbs, the fir tree, I become part of it.
The morning mists, the clouds, the gathering
waters,
I become part of it.

—Navajo chant

I am out of breath, sprawled on my back on a wet
stone
by the frigid bank of a nameless creek, swollen with
snowmelt.

The roar drives my red blood, cold moss glows
emerald,
translucent leaves of aspen offer shade, the green
fuse is everywhere.

“Mr. Bank, are you OK?” a voice calls from the trail.
“I’m listening to the creek,” I reply. “I’ll catch up.”

Coming late into the busy camp, I drop my pack
and rest again.
It reminds me how the forest is patient, outwaits its
passagers.

Tonight, under the blue-black sky, we will eat our fill;
The boys will return to their patrols weary with the
day’s march.

I will lay supine; the Milky Way will fill the
moonless night,
the nocturnal world, the spirits that whisper in the
ancient trees.

Is Christianity a Failure?

Robert Green Ingersoll Answers Questions from Brooklyn Ministers

In 1883, agnostic orator Robert Green Ingersoll (1833–1899) fielded questions from a body of clergy based in Brooklyn, New York. Here are the results.—EDS.

Question. Some of the clergymen say that the spread of infidelity is greatly exaggerated; that it makes more noise and creates more notice than conservative Christianity simply on account of its being outside of the accepted line of thought.

“Other religions were put in the crucible of criticism, and nothing was found but dross. At last it occurred to the intelligent to examine our own religion. . . .”

Answer: There was a time when an unbeliever, open and pronounced, was a wonder. At that time the church had great power; it could retaliate; it could destroy. The church abandoned the stake only when too many men objected to being burned. At that time infidelity [in the sense of nonadherence to religious tenets, coming from the word *infidel*—EDS.] was clad not simply in novelty, but often in fire. Of late years the thoughts of men have been turned, by virtue of modern discoveries, as the result of countless influences, to an investigation of the foundation of orthodox religion. Other religions were put in the crucible of criticism, and nothing was found but dross. At last it occurred to the intelligent to examine our own religion, and this examination has excited great interest and

great comment. People want to hear, and they want to hear because they have already about concluded themselves that the creeds are founded in error.

Thousands come to hear me because they are interested in the question, because they want to hear a man say what they think. They want to hear their own ideas from the lips of another. The tide has turned, and the spirit of investigation, the intelligence, the intellectual courage of the world is on the other side. A real good old-fashioned orthodox minister who believes . . . with all his might, is regarded today as a theological mummy, a kind of corpse acted upon by the galvanic battery of faith, making strange motions, almost like those of life—not quite.

Question: How would you convey moral instruction from youth up, and what kind of instruction would you give?

Answer: I regard Christianity as a failure. Now, then, what is Christianity? I do not include in the word “Christianity” the average morality of the world, or the morality taught in all systems of religion; that is, as distinctive Christianity. Christianity is this: A belief in the inspiration of the scriptures, the atonement, the life, death, and resurrection of

Christ, an eternal reward for the believers in Christ, and eternal punishment for the rest of us. Now, take from Christianity its miracles, its absurdities of the atonement and fall of man, and the inspiration of the Scriptures, and I have no objection to it as I understand it. I believe, in the main, in the Christianity which I suppose Christ taught, that is, in kindness, gentleness, forgiveness. I do not believe in loving enemies; I have pretty hard work to love my friends. Neither do I believe in revenge. No man can afford to keep the viper of revenge in his heart. But I believe in justice, in self-defense. Christianity—that is, the miraculous part—must be abandoned. As to morality—morality is born, is born of the instinct of self-preservation. If man could not suffer, the word “conscience” never would have passed his lips. Self-preservation makes larceny a crime. Murder will be regarded as a bad thing as long as a majority object to being murdered. Morality does not come from the clouds; it is born of human want and human experience. We need no inspiration, no inspired work. The industrious man knows that the idle has no right to rob him of the product of his labor, and the idle man knows that he has no right to do it. It is not wrong because we find it in the Bible, but I presume it was put in the Bible because it is wrong. Then, you find in the Bible other things upheld that are infamous. And why? Because the writers of the Bible were barbarians, in many things, and because that book is a mixture of good and evil. I see no trouble in teaching morality without miracle. I see no use of miracle. What can men do with it? Credulity is not a virtue. The credulous are not necessarily charitable. Wonder is not the mother of wisdom. I believe

INFIDELITY

Infidelity has always been a protest against tyranny in the state, against intolerance in the church, against barbarism in the family. It has always been an appeal for universal kindness and tenderness.

—“*The Brooklyn Divines*,” Vol. VII

children should be taught to investigate and to reason for themselves, and that there are facts enough to furnish a foundation for all human virtue. We will take two families; in the one, the father and mother are both Christians, and they teach their children their creed; teach them that they are naturally totally depraved; that they can only hope for happiness in a future life by pleading the virtues of another, and that a certain belief is necessary to salvation; that God punishes his children forever. Such a home has a certain atmosphere. Take another family; the father and mother teach their children that they should be kind to each other because kindness produces happiness; that they should be gentle; that they should be just, because justice is the mother of joy. And suppose this father and mother say to their children: "If you are happy it must be as a result of your own actions; if you do wrong you must suffer the consequences. No Christ can redeem you; no savior can suffer for you. You must suffer the consequences of your own misdeeds. If you plant you must reap, and you must reap what you plant." And suppose these parents also say: "You must find out the conditions of happiness. You must investigate the circumstances by which you are surrounded. You must ascertain the nature and relation of things so that you can act in accordance with known facts, to the end that you may have health and peace." In such a family, there would be a certain atmosphere, in my judgment, a thousand times better and purer and sweeter than in the other. The church generally teaches that rascality pays in this world, but not in the next; that here virtue is a losing game, but the dividends will be large in another world. They tell the people that they must serve God on credit, but the devil pays cash here. That is not my doctrine. My doctrine is that a thing is right because it pays, in the highest sense. That is the reason it is right. The reason a thing is wrong is because it is the mother of misery. Virtue has its reward here and now. It means health; it means intelligence, contentment, success. Vice means exactly the opposite. Most of us have more passion than judgment, carry more sail than ballast, and by the tempest of passion we are blown from port, we are wrecked and lost. We cannot be saved by faith or by belief. It is a slower

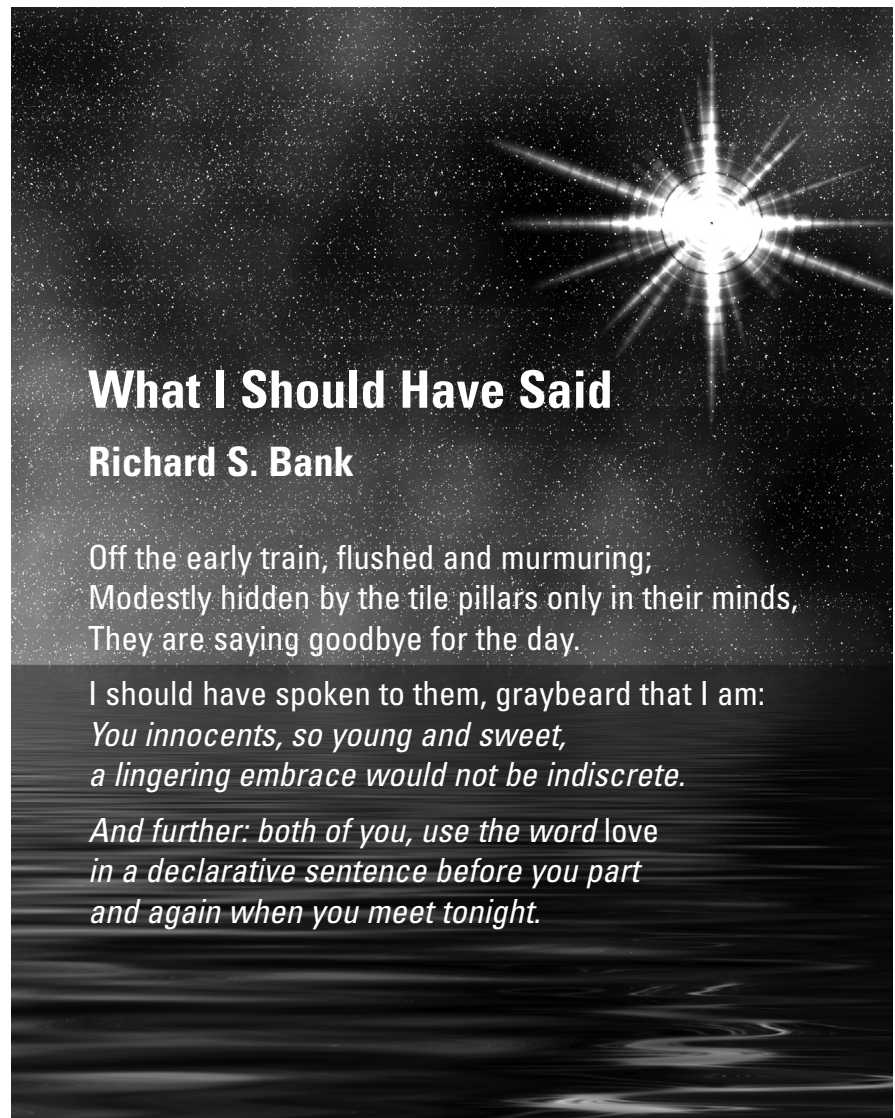
process: We must be saved by knowledge, by intelligence—the only lever capable of raising mankind.

Question. The shorter catechism . . . says "that man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." What is your idea of the chief end of man?

Answer. It has always seemed a little curious to me that joy should be held in such contempt here, and yet promised hereafter as an eternal reward. Why not be happy here, as well as in heaven? Why not have joy here? Why not go to heaven now, that is, today? Why not enjoy the sunshine of this world, and all there is of good in it? It is bad enough; so bad that I do not believe it was ever created by a beneficent deity; but what little good there is in it, why not have it? Neither do I believe that it is the end of man to glorify God. How can the Infinite

be glorified? Does he wish for reputation? He has no equals, no superiors. How can he have what we call reputation? How can he achieve what we call glory? Why should he wish the flattery of the average Presbyterian? What good will it do him to know that his course has been approved of by the Methodist Episcopal Church? What does he care, even, for the religious weeklies, or the presidents of religious colleges? I do not see how we can help God, or hurt him. If there be an infinite Being, certainly nothing we can do can in any way affect him. We can affect each other, and therefore man should be careful not to sin against man. For that reason I have said a hundred times, injustice is the only blasphemy. **ff**

—From "The Brooklyn Divines,"
Vol. VII



What I Should Have Said

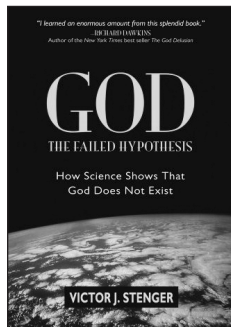
Richard S. Bank

Off the early train, flushed and murmuring;
Modestly hidden by the tile pillars only in their minds,
They are saying goodbye for the day.

I should have spoken to them, graybeard that I am:
*You innocents, so young and sweet,
a lingering embrace would not be indiscrete.*

*And further: both of you, use the word love
in a declarative sentence before you part
and again when you meet tonight.*

TOUR DE FORCE



Tom Flynn

***God, The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows that God Does Not Exist*, by Victor J. Stenger (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2007, ISBN 978-1-59102-481-1) 287 pp. Cloth \$28.00.**

Are science and religion bitter opponents? Or are they at best complementary, at worst mutually aloof? The late Stephen Jay Gould argued that science and religion occupied “non-overlapping magisteria” and so had nothing foundational to say to each other. Eager to rebut the idea that Darwinism might promote atheism, evolution campaigner Eugenie Scott has distinguished the scientist’s methodological naturalism from the atheist’s philosophical naturalism; for Scott, the one need not imply the other.

Victor Stenger is having none of this.

Since 1988, this prolific physicist-astronomer has penned a stack of books that share a single, hard-nosed assumption, one that he makes explicit in this volume, seventh of the series: “[T]he supernatural hypothesis of God is testable, verifiable, and falsifiable by the established methods of science.”

Starting with *Not by Design: The Origin of the Universe* (1988), Stenger trained his encyclopedic knowledge and bracing clarity of thought upon various fashionable strategies by which sophisticated theists have sought to use “boundary issues” in science to defend their metaphysical preferences. In *Not by Design*, Stenger demolished the best anthropic and fine-tuning arguments for a cosmic designer then extant. In 1995’s *The Unconscious Quantum*, he refuted claims that the indeterminacy of quantum physics offers a supra-natural substrate for such metaphysical entities as an immaterial human soul. In 2003’s *Has Science Found God?*, he sifted the evi-

dence of cosmology and physics for—or as it turned out, against—the existence of God as traditionally defined. For Stenger, in these and other works, science can—and must—address the question of whether the supernatural can exist. When it does so, in one domain after another, it says “No” in a bell-clear voice: “[B]y this moment in time science has advanced sufficiently to be able to make a definitive statement on the existence or nonexistence of a God having the attributes . . . traditionally associated with the Judaic-Christian-Islamic God.”

This is a controversial stance, but Stenger is far from alone in it. Intellectual historian David Berman noted that genuine, self-avowed atheism (as opposed to charges of atheism hurled at one’s opponents) was almost unknown until about the time of Darwin. Prior to that time, questions of how the universe came to be or of how living things came to inhabit it were patently insoluble. Scientifically rigorous skeptics felt compelled toward deism because they had no alternative to positing a God who had, if nothing else, started the cosmic clockwork ticking. Darwin provided a model of how life might have emerged from nonlife through an authorless process. At about the same time, advances in astronomy and physics had made the idea of an authorless *universe* more conceivable. Overt, informed atheism was finally possible and spread rapidly through the educated classes. (Closer to our own day, Richard Dawkins has famously written that it was only after he came to a deep understanding of Darwinian theory that his personal “spiritual” quest was able to conclude with a final attainment of atheism.)

The present work, *God, the Failed Hypothesis (GTFH)*, caps Stenger’s nearly twenty-year exploration of these issues. Where each of his six prior works focused on a particular domain of inquiry, *GTFH* covers a sweeping expanse of contemporary science, *science* being liberally defined. Stenger’s book encompasses quantum physics, astronomy, the biosciences, and even such social-scientific domains as history and ethics. Also, where his previous works sometimes waxed technical or mathematical—particularly in their appendices—*GTFH* is written throughout in a voice that any thoughtful reader should find both accessible and compelling.

Following on the heels of Daniel C. Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* and Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*, Stenger’s book fills a niche that, in all likelihood, no one but Stenger could have filled. Rather than writing another brief for atheism, Stenger demonstrates how uniformly the findings of contemporary science *support* the brief for atheism. “Existing scientific models contain no place where God is included as an ingredient in order to explain observations,” he notes dryly. Frequently citing his earlier works, Stenger sometimes gives *GTFH* the feel of an introductory or “gateway” volume, but this hard-hitting book stands on its own.

GTFH comprises two principal sections: the first strictly scientific, the second more exhortative. The initial section begins with a bracing preface in which Stenger sets forth the terms of debate and argues crisply that science can and does disprove the existence of God. The opening chapter sets ground rules, arguing in particular that classical theism is rich with claims amendable to scientific testing. The next four chapters offer a whirlwind tour of the sciences. Chapter 2, “The Illusion of Design,” may be the most powerful refutation of Intelligent Design creationism ever compressed into twenty-nine pages. Chapter 3, “Searching for a World beyond Matter,” demonstrates that the preponderance of scientific findings neither need, nor leave any room for, action by immaterial entities. Chapter 4, “Cosmic Evidence,” tackles believers’ claims that the universe must have had an origin and could not have arisen naturally. Stenger shows with bold authority that the truth is exactly

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the contrary. Not even the ancient riddle “Why is there something rather than nothing?” offers theists comfort: recent findings indicate that “nothingness” is unstable, and so, brute probability favors the existence of something rather than nothing, making God superfluous even here. Chapter 5, “The Uncongenial Universe,” targets fine-tuning arguments advanced in defense of everything from classical theism to New Age vitalism—running them all to ground in a mere thirty-one pages.

That concludes the first and most valuable section of the book. Stenger now turns his attention to what we might call “softer sciences.” Chapter 6, “The Failures of Revelation,” treats history, surveying the vacuities of so-called religious experience and the failures of biblical prophecy. This may be the book’s weakest chapter—secular humanists have heard all this before, while believ-

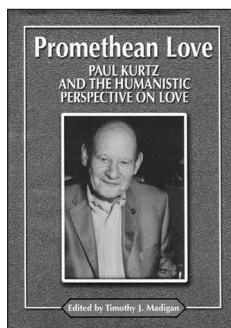
ers will likely dismiss it as atheist chest-beating—but it remains an impressive feat of distillation. Turning to ethics, in chapter 7, “Do Our Values Come from God?”, Stenger surveys the weak historical links between religion and the evolution of human values, while in chapter 8 he treats “The Argument from Evil” with the concision readers will by now expect. The final chapters contrast the kinds of gods that *might* exist (if only the evidence did not disprove them) with the contradictory, sometimes loathsome notions of God to which some contemporary faith traditions have resorted. He is particularly, and justly, hard on the *courant* doctrine of “divine Hiddenness.” Stenger concludes by weighing the social utility of religion: far from being worthwhile though untrue, Stenger finds that religion in the abstract has done much more harm than good. “By ridding the world of God, sci-

ence helps us to control our own lives rather than submitting them to the arbitrary authority of priests and kings who justify their acts by divine will.”

In *God, the Failed Hypothesis*, Victor J. Stenger makes a comprehensive and almost overwhelmingly powerful case that, if the sort of God most Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in existed, the resulting physical consequences would be easily measurable by modern science. Those measurements have been performed, and in every field surveyed the existence of the classical God is flatly refuted. Stenger’s new book is a tour de force of scope, brevity, and rhetorical power. One after another, he defeats each of the recently popular, seemingly scientific arguments that believers wield in frantic efforts to defend—let’s face it—their impossible and ungrounded belief systems.

Highly recommended. **ff**

EUPRAXSOPHY UNBOUND



Tim Delaney

Promethean Love: Paul Kurtz and the Humanistic Perspective on Love, edited by Timothy J. Madigan (New Castle, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006, ISBN 1-9040303-62-50) 334 pp. Cloth \$69.

According to Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gave it to humans to help them survive. As a result, Prometheus serves as a symbol of selfless love. Selfless love, in turn, can be viewed as a critical element of secular humanism. *Promethean Love* is a collection of essays generated as a result of a conference on the philosophy of love (held at Brock University in Ontario, Canada, on February 13–15, 1992). *Promethean Love* also represents a tribute to the

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work and writings of Paul Kurtz, arguably the most important figure in secular humanism during the past few decades. Kurtz has not only written on a wide variety of humanistic topics, he has also established learning centers across the globe designed to challenge the “gods” who still attempt to manipulate humanity.

The first chapter of *Promethean Love* appropriately begins with an article written by Kurtz, “Promethean Love: Unbound.” Kurtz explains that the Promethean myth has inspired countless generations of protesters, secularists, and humanists, and it challenges such religious myths as the Mosaic, Christian, and Mohammedan. As Kurtz

states, “Prometheus serves as a symbol for those who reject the reigning theistic orthodoxies and who criticize the temptation of mortal men and women, to deify and worship the dark unknown in an effort to assuage their fears of death”

“Kurtz suggests that the myth of Prometheus is still relevant today, because Prometheus symbolizes independence, courage, and confidence to persist and succeed—despite such negative forces as religion and authoritarian forms of government.”

(p. 3). Kurtz suggests that the myth of Prometheus is still relevant today, because Prometheus symbolizes independence, courage, and confidence to persist and succeed—despite such negative forces as religion and authoritarian forms of government.

In this chapter, Kurtz also explains Promethean love in terms of heroic deeds motivated by altruism. Kurtz claims that love is necessary for a fulfilling life and that Promethean love will liberate men and women from darkness and fear and lead them to higher levels of intelligence. Kurtz argues that Promethean idealism is a powerful and positive source of power in the universe. It also serves as an inspiration to Kurtz's concept of *eupraxisophy*—a naturalistic and humanistic philosophy of life that translates, roughly, to “good

practice and wisdom.”

The second chapter in Part One, “Prometheus the Foreknowing,” by Noel Robertson, is influenced by the Greek tragedy *Prometheus Bound*. Robertson argues that Prometheus is an embodiment of love and humanism because of his philanthropic behavior. The Greek word for “philanthropy” (unselfish love for humanity) first appeared in *Prometheus Bound*, when Zeus punished Prometheus after he gave fire to humans. Zeus had him chained to a rock where a vulture (or eagle) pecked out

his liver throughout the day only to have the organ regrow by night. This torture was repeated daily until Zeus finally freed Prometheus (by having Hercules kill the vulture), because Zeus hoped to harness Prometheus's gift of prophecy. Prometheus's very name (in Greek, “the foreknowing”) refers to this ability. Interestingly, Prometheus had a brother named Epimetheus (“knowing afterwards”) who possessed hindsight rather than foreknowledge.

Part Two of *Promethean Love* focuses on pragmatic naturalism and human-

FURTHER THOUGHTS

Nathan Bupp

This addendum to Tim Delaney's review of *Promethean Love* is an attempt to dwell just a bit more on an important component of this overall fine volume. I speak of Paul Kurtz's edifying rejoinder to the essays contained in the last chapter, called “From Philosophy to Eupraxisophy: A Response to Critics and Commentators.” In seventy-three pages, with passion and elegance, Kurtz reflects on the issues and ideas that have informed his career as a philosopher, public intellectual, and builder of humanist institutions.

“From Philosophy to Eupraxisophy” sums up most fittingly the trajectory of Kurtz's own intellectual development. Starting with an intense interest in metaethics (a concern with how to state ethical questions), Kurtz soon became disenchanted with the way philosophy was being practiced in universities (mostly according to the analytic school) and increasingly turned to the project of developing and enunciating normative ethical principles that could be applied artfully and and wisely to *life as lived*.

Action or praxis was always a key watchword for Kurtz in this regard. One must descend from the ivory tower and be prepared to defend normative propositions in the public square. Kurtz writes: “I was convinced that it was important to move

from philosophy (the love of wisdom) to *eupraxisophy* (the practice of wisdom). . . . I have maintained that we can bring the best philosophical and ethical wisdom and scientific knowledge to deal with problems of practice.” Heavily influenced by his mentor, Sidney Hook, Kurtz has been stalwart in his defense of secular humanist values, institutionalizing ideas in a world where the winds of doctrine are constantly changing, and one never knows when the forces of unreason will assert themselves anew, leading us to re-enter battles we thought had been won long ago.

Reminiscing on the 1960s and 1970s, Kurtz tells us of the “many confrontations I experienced at the hands of the extreme left and the extreme right.” During that time of social ferment and transformation, Kurtz assumed editorship of *The Humanist* magazine (in 1967) and immediately announced an editorial policy that would “deal with concrete moral questions of wider concern to the public.” With Kurtz's capable hands on the helm, humanists were out front on the key issues of the day such as abortion, intelligence and race, homosexuality, the Vietnam War, violent protests on campuses, and many others. In 1969, Kurtz founded Prometheus Books. Clearly an exciting time for Kurtz, his experience solidified in his mind the

need to develop institutions capable of embodying and defending humanist values and ideals. The story proceeds with Kurtz persevering in this task through 1980 when FREE INQUIRY was founded up to the present.

Kurtz's thoughtful responses to each commentator in this volume provide the reader with a panoramic, integrated view of Kurtz's own elegant conception of secular humanism. Kurtz's response to James Lawler, the final one in the rejoinder, exemplifies the central thrust of his passionate commitments. “We need to ‘minister to the soul’ . . . as an alternative to the medicine men of the past, gurus and spiritualists, soothsayers, rabbis, mullahs, and priests, we need to demonstrate that life can be lived well without the illusions of religiosity, that it can be rich with significance and overflowing with joy, and that concrete choices can be made wisely and satisfactorily.” Those of us fortunate enough to have worked side by side with Kurtz on this task can attest to his indefatigable spirit and drive. For Kurtz, ideas have consequences; but, for him, more important is what you do *in the service of those ideas*. Referring to himself as a “pragmatist's pragmatist,” he stands as a shining example of what an unquiet Promethean life committed to “good practice and wisdom” can forge and achieve. **f i**

Nathan Bupp is an associate editor of FREE INQUIRY and the director of Communications for the Center for Inquiry.

ism. John M. Novak (“Pragmatic Love”) offers a relatively weak explanation of pragmatism and pragmatic love. He describes pragmatism as an efficient way of going about things and pragmatic love as “centered on the quality of the unique and contingent live connection made by each individual” (p. 81).

Timothy Madigan’s article, “Promethean Love and Humanism,” offers a different perspective on Prometheus and his influence on humanity. Madigan argues, “While Prometheus gave to humans the gifts of technical knowledge (reason), it was Zeus who gave them the desire to love one another (compassion). . . . The legend of Prometheus demonstrates that reason without compassion can be a deadly tool. The hope that human societies can be built solely upon a rationalistic basis is a hope fraught with terror” (p. 86).

Madigan also alludes to the many different interpretations of humanism—a problem that remains today and threatens the core of the movement itself. For example, Madigan describes how Kurtz is basically a very happy person (something I, too, have noticed) and how he is taken to task by other humanists. Happiness is something we all strive for and something that humanists wish upon all of humanity, and yet Kurtz is criticized for saying that he usually wakes up happy and feels that life is wonderful. Marvin Kohl, for example, in his article “On Suffering,” claims that Kurtz lacks a tragic sense. This raises the question, “Are humanists allowed to be happy?”

Tad S. Clements explains the various usages of the term *love* in his article, “Love in Naturalistic Perspective.” The naturalistic perspective on love, according to Clements, is to understand and explain “love” in all its numerous manifestations—erotic, romantic, parental, etc.—in naturalistic (i.e., rational and scientific) terms while also eliminating the “surreptitious, unjustifiable, metaphysical assumptions, mystification, and word magic in some of the discourse about love” (p. 102). Naturalism, then, embraces the approach of the natural sciences and the scientific method. Naturalists argue that love—in all of its manifestations—has natural causes.

Spirituality and Christianity are the themes of Part Three of *Promethean*

Love. This is one of the weakest sections of the book. Richard A. Berg attempts to explain psychic and humanistic love as distinct forms of love. For example, Berg argues that, both psychic and humanistic love stem from the everyday, mundane way in which we are inextricably caught up in one another’s lives.

In “Autonomy, Arrogance, Agape,” Hendrik Hart explains that the major Christian traditions are separated in much the same manner as the various traditions of humanism. Identifying an objectively true concept of love is just one of the many concepts that human-

“Kurtz argues that
Promethean idealism is a
powerful and positive source
of power in the universe.”

ists, as well as Christians, find difficulty in achieving. Vague statements made by Hart leave the reader confused as to his intended point.

Sexuality and love are the themes of Part Four. In “Love, Sex, and Marriage,” the late Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough accurately state that “Love is as much a cultural construct as it is a genetic biological need. Similarly, though sex is a biological drive, its place in society is socially defined” (p. 143). Western culture, the Bulloughs explain, created the institution of marriage to regulate sexual activity for procreation and family. Romantic love generally precedes marriage and (ideally) continues throughout. The Bulloughs claim that the origins of our differing concepts of love date back to the Greeks who defined love in at least two different ways. “One was *eros*, an ennobling feeling. The second kind of love was *agape*, a selfless concern for the well-being of others, which also included *philia* (friendship, brotherhood, [and] sisterhood). Separate from these definitions of love was *erotike*, a sexual passion, although later *erotike* was combined with *eros* to produce romantic love” (p. 143).

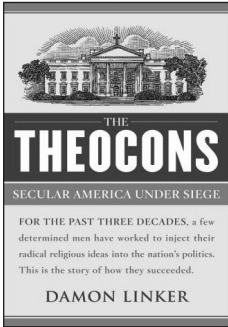
Morton Hunt, in “Love in Humanist Perspective, Four Decades Ago and Now,” describes humanistic love. “The humanist view of love seeks to explain it not in terms of poetry, drama, or classic love stories but in terms of the sciences that deal with human emotion and behavior, primarily psychology, sociology, anthropology, and behavior genetics” (p. 157).

Self-interest and altruism are discussed in Part Five. David M. Goicoechea, in “The Humanistic Welcome: Kurtz, Singer, Levinas,” claims that the essence of Promethean love goes beyond the golden rule of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. “Are not Kurtz, Levinas, and Singer arguing rather that we should love so as to do unto others as they would have us do unto them? Prometheus did not do unto mortals what he would like done unto him. He had a sense of their needs and he sacrificed himself in service to them” (pp. 184–85). Marvin Kohl, in “Promethean Altruistic Humanism: A Reply to Paul Johnson,” provides clear descriptions of humanism, altruism, love, and altruistic humanism. Kohl describes the altruistic humanist as someone concerned with the welfare of humanity who has cultivated unselfish feelings and the nurturing of love.

Promethean Love concludes with a detailed description of eupraxsophy. As James Lawler explains in “Love, God, Morality, and Money: Eupraxsophy in Kant and Hegel,” *eupraxsophy* is the term proposed by Kurtz to describe “a general worldview that attempts to bring knowledge or wisdom to bear on the practices of life so that life is lived well and happily. The elements of eupraxsophical life include personal pleasures, creative labor, loving relationships and morally responsible social behavior” (p. 239). Kurtz addresses criticisms and questions about his idea of eupraxsophy in the final chapter, “From Philosophy to Eupraxsophy: A Response to Critics and Commentators” (see the accompanying article by Nathan Bupp on page 59).

Promethean Love is not only a highly informative collection of articles on such topics as the myth of Prometheus, love, humanism, and naturalism; it is equally thought-provoking. This book is highly recommended. **ff**

THEOCON ARTISTS



Michelle Goldberg

The Theocons: Secular America under Siege, by Damon Linker
(New York: Doubleday, 2006, ISBN 0-385-51647-9) 272 pp. Cloth
\$26.00.

Often fascinating, sometimes frustrating, Damon Linker's book *The Theocons: Secular America under Siege* is the story of the reactionary priest Richard John Neuhaus and the clique surrounding his magazine, *First Things*. It traces how these men, whose politics swung from Far Left to Far Right around a steady axis of Jacobinlike fury, helped craft the intellectual architecture of the religious Right and guide the domestic policy of the Bush administration. A former *First Things* editor, alarmed by the antidemocratic ambitions of his ex-colleagues, Linker is uniquely positioned to report on the movement, and his book is very valuable for elucidating an underreported aspect of the rise of Christian conservatism. Reading it, though, one occasionally wishes for more context, because the ideology Linker traces has darker antecedents than he reveals.

Linker argues that, while the religious Right is usually understood primarily as an evangelical phenomenon, many of the ideas animating the movement came from the group of largely Catholic thinkers clustered around Neuhaus. He sets out their ideology, which he calls "theoconservatism," at the beginning of the book: "Theoconservatism teaches that a secular society is both undesirable and unus-

Michelle Goldberg is the author of Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism. She is a contributing writer at Salon.com, and her work has appeared in Rolling Stone, The New York Observer, The (UK) Guardian, In These Times, Newsday, and many other publications.

tainable; that for most of its history the United States has been a thoroughly Christian nation founded on absolute moral principals that make no sense outside of a religious context...[and] that the liberal and secular drift of American culture since the 1960s is the result of an organized effort by liberal and secular elites in the nation's education and media establishment to impose their corrupt views on the nation through antidemocratic means." In this view, only the re-Christianization of politics and culture can save the nation from its own dissoluteness.

In challenging conventional wisdom about the role of evangelical activism on America's rightward drift, Linker mildly overstates the influence of the *First Things* coterie. Most of the ideas he attributes to them, including their revisionist history of the United States, were percolating in fundamentalist Protestant circles at the same time that they started appearing in Neuhaus's writings. It makes more sense to view the Protestant Right and the Catholic Right as two parts of the same movement, with significant overlap and cross-pollination between them (as well as tensions and contradictions).

Nevertheless, Linker convincingly shows that Neuhaus and his comrades had a significant role in bringing these once-antagonistic groups together. "The theocons would provide evangelicals and other culturally alienated Christians and Jews with ideas and rhetoric to challenge secular politics at a fundamental level—and to contend, for the first time, for political and cultural power," he writes. Neuhaus advised George W. Bush, who adopted Catholic

"culture of life" rhetoric to explain his opposition to abortion; also, a number of the president's most high-profile judicial nominees have been conservative Catholics. Indeed, the opposition to contraception that now pervades the entire Christian Right (and the Bush administration) represents the triumph of a distinctly Catholic idea.

Neuhaus's own Protestant background probably helped him in fashioning an interdenominational anti-secular coalition. He began his career as a Lutheran minister, and, even as he embraced Catholic doctrine during the 1980s, he didn't officially convert until 1990. Submitting to the Church fulfilled something in him. Linker quotes him as writing, "Do I have a felt need for authority, for obedience, for submission? But of course. Obedience is the rightly ordered disposition towards truth, and submission is subordination of the self to that by which the self is claimed."

His submission has not been total; Neuhaus, unlike the Vatican, was an ardent supporter of the Iraq War. Still, this is an enormously telling quotation, especially when coupled with what Linker calls Neuhaus's "often violent hostility to those temporal authorities who fail (in his judgment) to live up to the metaphysical ideal." Erich Fromm described just such a mix of rebellion and longing for self-abnegation as components of the authoritarian character in his landmark 1941 book *Escape From Freedom*. "[T]he authoritarian character's fight against authority is essentially defiance," Fromm wrote. "It is an attempt to assert himself and to overcome his own feeling of powerlessness by fighting authority, although the longing for submission remains present... There are many individuals and political movements that are puzzling to the superficial observer because of what seems to be an inexplicable change from 'radicalism' to extreme authoritarianism."

Neuhaus, along with his longtime collaborator Michael Novak, underwent exactly this kind of change. Both began their careers as 1960s leftists given to pondering the violent overthrow of the American government. Like many totalitarians before them, they lurched from sentimental reverence for "the people" to callous rage when said people failed

to live up to their own exacting ideals. At one point in the 1960s, Linker writes, Novak speculated that, if Americans couldn't be made to recognize the need for revolution, "it might become necessary to place 'the American majority . . . for a change, in the line of fire.'"

Neuhaus's and Novak's politics would change drastically by the 1980s, but their characters seem to have remained constant. An infamous 1996 issue of *First Things*, titled "The End of Democracy? The Judicial Usurpation of Politics," tiptoed toward a call for armed revolution against the Clinton "regime." A few years later, Neuhaus's curdled populism led him to speculate, albeit with many caveats, on the power and subversive influence of American Jewry in an essay titled, "Whatever You Do, Don't Mention the Jews." The Jewish devotion to public secularism "places American Jewry in an

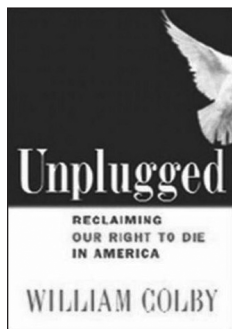
adversarial relationship to the culture, provoking the perception that Jews really are . . . strangers in their own country," he wrote.

Linker doesn't delve too deeply into this aspect of Neuhaus's thought, but it seems germane to his broader ideology, because his words echo centuries of clerical authoritarianism. Indeed, if there's one thing missing from *The Theocons*, it's a reckoning with the antecedents of Neuhaus's philosophy. To what extent does theoconservatism derive from the same sources as old-fashioned clerical fascism? Neuhaus and friends are not, after all, the first group of intellectuals to yearn for a spiritualized national unity that would erase democracy's contradictions and overcome enervating decadence.

Linker, of course, knows this—in a fascinating dialogue on *The New Repub-*

lic's Web site with a *First Things* contributor, he wrote, "In his insistent emphasis on the need for order, authority, and tradition, as well as in his warnings about the psychological and social ravages of modern skepticism, Neuhaus echoes such luminaries of the European (and Catholic) Right as Joseph de Maistre, Juan Donoso Cortés, and (once again) Carl Schmitt, all of whom were staunch opponents of liberalism and modernity." (More than that, Schmitt was an unrepentant member of the Nazi Party.) Linker's book would have been richer if he had grappled with this intellectual history—a history fundamentally hostile to the foundational ideas of American democracy. Nevertheless, he has written an important inside account of the ultramontane radicalism that passes for mainstream political discourse in our unfortunate age. **fi**

AUTONOMY SHORT-CIRCUITED



Ronald A. Lindsay

***Unplugged: Reclaiming Our Right to Die in America*, by William H. Colby (New York: AMACOM, 2006, ISBN 0-8144-0882-6) 272 pp. Cloth \$24.95.**

It is difficult to believe that just a little over thirty years ago there was no generally recognized legal right to refuse or direct the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment. The seminal case of *In Re Quinlan* transformed our legal and medical landscape. As a result of judicial decisions in the wake of *Quinlan*, and then as a result of statutes enacted in virtually all the states, patients obtained the right to make decisions

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regarding life-sustaining treatment. Given the prior entrenched practice under which physicians paternalistically assumed responsibility for making treatment decisions for the patient's "benefit," this recognition of patient autonomy and responsibility was nothing short of revolutionary.

However, as William Colby points out in *Unplugged: Reclaiming Our Right to Die in America*—his history of legal battles over withdrawal of treatment—this hard-earned and valuable right is in danger of being eroded. One threat comes from religious fundamentalists, including segments of the Catholic Church, who seize any opportunity to remove authority over life-sustaining medical treatment from patients and

patient representatives. If patients and their families are more at ease and do not have as much to fear from the dying process, this spells trouble for institutions that rely on human anxiety and misery to stay in business. Empowered patients have less need to turn to priests, pastors, and prayers.

Ironically, the other threat comes from patients themselves or, more precisely, from the failure of most individuals to make clear their wishes regarding treatment prior to becoming patients. Almost all litigated cases involving withdrawal of treatment result from situations in which a patient is no longer competent and the patient's representative (usually a spouse or other relative) must determine what the patient "would have wanted." Unfortunately, there are often other relatives who have sharply distinct recollections about the desires of patient X. Enter the lawyers, and, instead of Uncle Joe dying in peace, his body is artificially sustained during prolonged litigation while a judge decides the exact meaning of Joe's remark ten years ago that "he did not want to live like that." If Colby has one clear and important message in his book, it is this: take as much control of your dying process as possible by executing a health care power of attorney, a living will, or both. (Colby prefers the first alternative on the grounds that living wills cannot antici-

pate every situation and are frequently ignored by physicians.)

Colby's detailed analysis of the Terri Schiavo litigation, which begins his book, underscores the dangers of dying without making one's wishes about treatment clear. The battle over whether Schiavo's life support, including her feeding tube, could be withdrawn resulted in multiple trials, multiple appeals, and enormous attorneys' fees. It culminated in a politically inspired media circus. Florida Governor Jeb Bush pushed through a law ("Terri's Law") that allowed him to order reinsertion of Schiavo's feeding tube, which Florida courts struck down. Then Congress, controlled by the Republican Right, first tried to subpoena Schiavo for a hearing, specifying that her feeding tube be in place, and, when that tactic failed, passed a law that purported to give the federal courts authority over Schiavo's case. This was an interesting maneuver on the part of conservatives who routinely decry judicial activism but apparently are not reluctant to run roughshod over federalism or to hijack the judicial system when it serves their own purposes.

Ultimately, this tactic also proved unsuccessful. Schiavo was finally allowed to die—while Randall Terry and other protesters from Operation Rescue picketed the hospice.

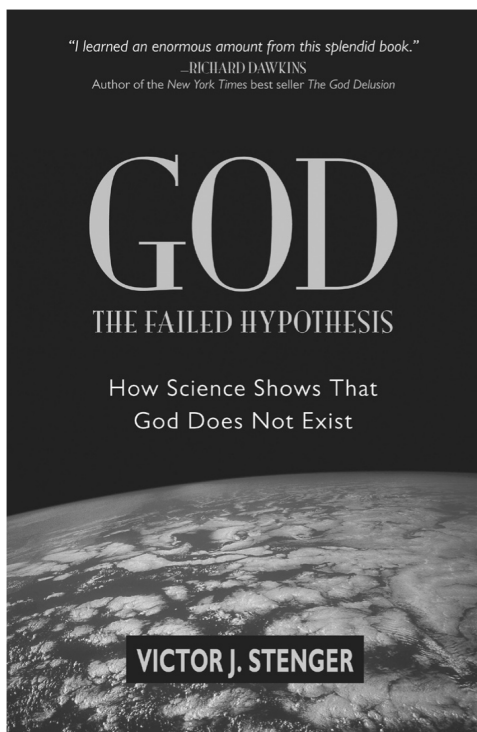
Colby's narrative of the Schiavo litigation and of two other key cases, *Quinlan*

“. . . respect for a patient's autonomy and liberty interests obliges us to honor the patient's wishes concerning her death, absent an imminent danger of substantial harm to others.”

and *Cruzan*, is engrossing and informative. Colby also adeptly traces the development of medical technology and the dilemmas caused by our increasing ability to sustain life even when many of one's organs cannot function on their own. Colby painstakingly explains the nature of a persistent vegetative state (PVS),

distinguishing it from both brain death and coma, and describes the tremendous increase in the number of PVS patients. One reason there was scant law on the right of patients to withdraw life-sustaining treatment at the time that Karen Ann Quinlan entered a PVS was that there were so few patients with this condition. Indeed, the term itself had only been coined in 1972. By contrast, today there are tens of thousands of PVS patients. Finally, Colby's careful description of the procedures by which the fate of incompetent patients is determined and his practical advice concerning health-care powers of attorney and living wills are both instructive and valuable.

Unfortunately, missing from Colby's book is anything resembling a legal or moral argument regarding the rights that patients *should* have. It might seem unfair to criticize Colby for this gap, since he expressly states that he does not intend his book to be an "advocacy" piece. Instead, he merely wants to describe the state of the law and medicine regarding life-sustaining treatment, so individuals can obtain a better understanding of the choices with which



***God: The Failed Hypothesis* is a powerful new book which carefully examines the evidence for the existence of God and concludes that it is totally insufficient. Included in his critique is creationism and intelligent design, fine tuning, and other popular apologetics used to justify belief in God—all of which fail. This book masterfully presents the scientific case against God!**

Victor J. Stenger is a distinguished professor emeritus of physics and astronomy, who has taught at the University of Hawaii and the University of Colorado. He has written many papers in physics and astronomy journals and has authored several books examining religion and the paranormal.

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they or their loved ones might be confronted. Fair enough, but his book would have been strengthened by an argument for patient's rights founded on respect for a person's autonomy.

The problems caused by the lack of a theoretical foundation for patient's rights become evident when Colby turns his attention to physician-assisted suicide. Bear in mind that the right to demand withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment, although clearly important, will only help certain individuals. There are many others, in particular, many terminally ill cancer patients, who face a protracted period of dying with a loss of functional capacity and possibly unremitting suffering, who are not being sustained by respirators, feeding tubes, or other medical devices. They cannot end their suffering simply by becoming "unplugged." They need active assistance in hastening their deaths. Unfortunately, Colby comes out in opposition to legal assistance in dying. Although he acknowledges that the evidence from Oregon (the only state where physician-assisted suicide is legal) indicates that legal assistance in dying does not pose a threat to those who want to remain alive and, in fact, has resulted in a noticeable

improvement in palliative care, he quotes the American Medical Association (AMA) that assistance in dying is "antithetical to the [physician's] central mission of healing." Colby then states that we should "heed these words" but provides no explanation why we should accept the AMA's statement on assistance in dying as definitive and irrefutable.

Should we "heed these words"? No, and here's why: First, the AMA does not speak for all physicians. According to most surveys, a majority of American physicians considers it appropriate to assist a competent, terminally ill patient to die. More fundamentally, providing assistance in dying is not antithetical to medical practice. To the contrary, the physician is under an obligation to provide a continuum of care suited to the needs of the patient. Of course, the physician should try to "heal" the patient first, but, if recovery is unlikely, he or she can redirect his or her efforts to palliative care. If, despite the best efforts at palliative care, the patient's condition becomes too demeaning or painful (in the opinion of the patient), then the physician has a moral obligation to assist the patient in dying. Anything

less constitutes abandonment of the patient at his time of greatest need. Note that if one confined a physician's treatment to "healing," then the physician also would be prohibited from providing palliative care, which is a position that no one currently supports. Finally, respect for a patient's autonomy and liberty interests obliges us to honor the patient's wishes concerning his or her death, absent an imminent danger of substantial harm to others. The Oregon experience establishes that assistance in dying can be made legal without risk to those patients who want to continue to live. There is a compelling case for legalizing assisted suicide, and it is regrettable that Colby neither accepts it nor makes any attempt to refute it.

Nonetheless, despite this serious flaw Colby's book, overall, is a worthwhile investment of time. You will not read it without a growing sense of outrage at those who, for their own ideological purposes, seek to interfere with end-of-life choices, and when you finish it, you will, one hopes, make written plans for your own treatment should the need arise. 

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All inquiries are held in the strictest confidence.



(**Letters** *cont'd.* from p. 13)

of view with more effect than Sam Harris' hard-line approach, which itself leads nontheists back to an isolated encampment.

Steve Willey
Sandpoint, Idaho

Weapons of Mass Deception

Paul Kurtz's editorial ("Religion in Conflict," *FI*, February/March 2007) again points out that he was against the war in Iraq and that, if the war had not been undertaken, we would not be in the trouble we're in now. Well, maybe, but in several similar statements Kurtz has not addressed the initial rationale for the war, other than to say Saddam was a very bad actor and that if the inspectors had more time they probably would have proved there were no WMDs. He also asserts that the Bush administration used false pretenses to engage in war and its main concern was oil.

History will have to sort this out, but Kurtz's position fails to recognize that Saddam's own generals didn't know that he didn't have WMDs until about three months prior to the war. Somehow, Saddam cleverly manipulated information such that many world leaders and intelligence agencies were duped. The primary failure of this war was one of intelligence. Many failures followed, but it remains problematic to fault the administration for acting on that intelligence when it did. Did the administration "cherry pick" information to bolster its case? Probably, but that doesn't prove that they didn't believe Saddam had WMDs. Colin Powell believed it, and I believed him. He deeply regrets acting on poor intelligence, and so do we all.

We have an obligation to examine events leading up to the war and to understand how we were duped. I am not satisfied that has occurred yet, and those accountable have been allowed to slide. At the same time, critics of the war have an obligation to explain how they would have dealt with Saddam if he had had WMDs and we did not act. The UN was helpless. Russia, Germany, and

France were corrupted by Saddam and would not act. Israel's fate was hanging in the balance, just as it is today with Iran's nuclear ambitions. These are very difficult times, but trusting the international community to stop these characters through diplomacy or sanctions will not faze leaders who are willing to sacrifice their people for fanatical glory and world dominance.

Tom Bromley
Prescott, Arizona

Religious vs. Secular Concepts

As an atheist, I was appalled to read Wendy Kaminer's article ("Above Contempt," *FI*, March/February 2007), where she wrote that she'd "hate to see notions of sin give way to dysfunction" while adding that we ("nontheists") should also not jettison evil or abstain from judgmentalism.

These are hallmarks of the primitive prescientific mind, never mind that Kaminer proclaims she's a secularist. For example, "sin" is a fundamentally religious concept, which has no scientific or objective basis. Indeed, it is part of the religious mind virus or meme structure. Without the presumption of "sin," humans cannot be threatened with "damnation" and driven to seek redemption and refuge in religions.

On the other hand, psychiatric dysfunctions (such as are compiled in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*) have at least a statistical/empirical scientific basis. So why would one opt for "sin" over dysfunction unless one sympathized with circulating religious memes?

"Evil" is a similarly primitive concept, in which the origin is presumed to issue from a negative supernatural force ("Satan"). In reality, one need not invoke this at all, because ancient brain structures (e.g., the amygdala, reticular formation, etc.) can account for atavistic behaviors, from misdirected lust to territoriality to murder.

"Judgmentalism"—again—harkens back to antiquated religious notions embodied in typical Christian eschatology, specifically the "Judgment." What's important for Kaminer to understand is that eschewing "judgmentalism" does

not mean we atheists stop making ethical determinations. These can indeed be made (see, e.g., William Provine's *Evolution and the Foundation of Ethics*, *MLB Science*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1988) but minus the supernaturalist overtones.

In a God-obsessed culture, it's difficult enough being an atheist without secular apologists for religion insisting we withhold criticism of primitive beliefs, language, and their memes. Kaminer, on that score, should know better. Philip A. Stahl
Colorado Springs, Colorado

Wendy Kaminer replies:

I stand by my comments and my attachment to moral categories of good and evil. And I'm pleased to note that Mr. Stahl demonstrates his agreement with my view that secularists should not abstain from judgmentalism.

Is Secular Humanism a Religion?

I was disappointed that D.J. Grothe ("Wordplay for the Kingdom of Heaven," *FI*, February/March 2007, p. 65) failed to mention the "rest of the story" about our radio conversation regarding the religion of Secular Humanism. He only mentioned one aspect of Ian Markham's work, *A World Religions Reader*. While it is true that Markham said, "Secular Humanism then is not a religion," he went on to say immediately, "although curiously it does share certain features with religion."

In fact, Markham makes it clear on the preceding page (p. 5) that "religion for me is a way of life which embraces a total worldview, certain ethical demands, and certain social practices." During the radio broadcast, I pointed out to Mr. Grothe that Markham's definition of religion fits Secular Humanism to a "tee." Secular Humanism embraces a total worldview, suggests certain ethical demands, and advocates certain social practices.

Markham obviously included Secular Humanism as a religion in his book on world religions because he did not want to exclude it because of a too narrow

definition of religion. Buddhism, for example, has no God in its theological dogmatics, yet, on Markham's boarder definition of religion, Buddhism is included as a world religion. And it was Secular Humanists who insisted their beliefs were religious when seeking to exempt atheistic conscientious objectors from the military back in 1965. Of course, the U.S. Supreme Court in 1963 had already identified Secular Humanism as a religion in *Torcaso v. Watkins*.

Being British, Markham might not have known how touchy this issue is with Secular Humanists in the United States. If it became widely known that Secular Humanism is a religion, then their religious dogmas, such as philosophical naturalism, atheistic evolution, and ethical relativism (which are the assumed religious truth for much of what passes for public education in the United States), would have to be thrown out of America's classrooms due to consistent interpretation of the separation of church-and-state doctrine. Every sentient humanist knows this in his heart and seeks to keep this "dirty little secret" from being exposed to the public.

But we don't have to take Markham's word for it. Archie J. Bahm, a true-blue Secular Humanist (he founded the Southwestern Regional American Humanist Association in 1954), has written a book on *The World's Living Religions*, in which he places Humanism alongside Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Taoism, and Buddhism, among others, and point-blank says, "Humanism is a religion. Some Humanists claim that it is not only the major religion of Western civilization, but of all mankind."

However, the rope gets tighter. In a number of cases, United States courts have ruled that atheism is a religion. One of the more recent cases was handed down from the Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit (Case No. 04-1914, decided August, 2005). The ruling states, "The Supreme Court has recognized atheism as equivalent to a 'religion' for purposes of the First Amendment on numerous occasions." The court continued, "We have already indicated that atheism may be considered, in this specialized sense, a religion." And again, "Without venturing too far into the realm of the philosophical, we have suggested in the past that when a

person sincerely holds beliefs dealing with issues of 'ultimate concern' that for her occupy a 'place to that filled by . . . God in traditionally religious persons,' those beliefs represent her religion."

As far as the U.S. Courts are concerned, the issue is settled: Secular Humanism, based as it is on atheism and its attendant beliefs and practices, is a religion. Secular Humanists even have their own religious symbol sold in the pages of FREE INQUIRY magazine: it's a fish with Darwin's name inscribed in it and two little feet protruding under its belly.

Is it any wonder that Secular Humanist Richard Carrier, in his *Sense and Goodness Without God*, titles one of his last chapters: "The Secular Humanist's Heaven." Richard insists his first job in heaven is to defeat death! Good luck and good night!

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A Difference of Opinion

Sam Harris ("Beyond Believers," *FI*, February/March 2007) reports on his participation at the Salk Institute conference on science and religion. I found his account a revealing, self-serving distortion of what went on at the conference. Harris portrays those who oppose his and Dawkins's aggressive atheism as "eager purveyors of American-style religious bewilderment." This description is typical of the Harris style of writing, better suited for propaganda or the ad piece, but surely not an accurate description of the people who debated both him and Dawkins at the conference. (The Edge Web site [www.edge.org] makes available streaming video of some sessions of the conference, so readers can judge for themselves the accuracy of Harris's report of the proceedings.)

Scientists and philosophers who questioned Harris's position on religion were not "unctuous religious apologists," nor were they "giving voice to religious lunacy." People like Scott Atran and Mel Kroner, who rejected Harris's assumptions and took him to

task for his lack of rigor and dearth of evidence to support his conclusions, were not defending religion or supernaturalism.

Consider, finally, Harris's frustration at finding that the forum did not "resolve the centuries-old collision between reason and faith." Did he really think this could happen? Then, he offers the reader a sample of his misleading rhetoric when he insinuates that reputable scientists (presumably those who disagreed with him) did not know the "important intellectual and moral differences between knowing something and pretending to know it." "We are doomed," he exclaims.

Based on my reading of Harris, he is the only one pretending to know what he does not know. Moreover, nobody is doomed, although some unwary readers may incur some deception at the hands of Mr. Harris.

FI has done a disservice to its readers by publishing such a biased, misleading account of the conference without also providing a counterpoint article.

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