NOT A PHILOSOPHICAL ATHEISM
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1. Atheism and Beliefs in Supernatural Entities    3 - 11

2. Some Rationales for and Arguments about the Existence of god(s)    12 - 24
   The argument from authority
   Argument from faith
   The Argument from First Cause
   The argument from morality
   Argument from revelation
   The Ontological argument
   Argument from Natural Law
   The Argument from Design
   The Anthropic argument
   The Argument from Human Consciousness
   God and the creation of the cosmos
   Richard Dawkins on Pascal’s Wager

3. Some Alleged Functions of Religion    25 - 33
   Some other alleged functions of religion

4. Some Questions About God, Evil, the Soul and an Afterlife    34 - 51
   The problem of suffering and evil
   The idiocy of prayer
   Death and Immortal souls
   Morality, Immortality and the Soul
   On Miracles
   Why do people continue to believe in supernatural entities?
   Why the difference?

5. The Tribal God of the Old Testament    52 - 65
   The God of the Old Testament
   Ten Commandments, More or Less
   The Book of Esther, Power and Mass Murder Justified
   Some Other Voices of the Old Testament
   Christ and Evolving Christianity
   Early Christianity
   The Spanish Inquisition of the Church Militant
   Some Statistics of the Spanish Inquisition
   Christianity in the New World

7. Christian Fundamentalism 83 - 94
   Moral/political themes of Christian fundamentalism
   Godly directions from an emigre Indian reactionary

8. Americanism as a Religion 95 - 102
   America the Beautiful

9. Reaction and Oppression in Other World Religions 103 - 129
   European Judaism
   Zionism and Israel
   Islamic fundamentalism
   The Five Pillars of Islam
   The Four (or Five) law codes
   Sunni and Shia
   The Empire of the Turks
   Hindu fundamentalism
   Buddhism, the other-worldly?

10. Tribal and Non-State Religions 130 - 141
    Polytheism and Tribal religions
    Native American Spirituality
    On Indigenous European Religion
    An Old Norse Creation Tale
    Bruno Lett's 'Homage to Forgotten Ancestors'

11. Some Reflective Comments on Atheism 142 - 149
    Charles Templeton: A convert to sanity

12. Final Comments 150 - 155

References Cited 156 - 158
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CHAPTER 1

Atheism and Beliefs in Supernatural Entities

This essay is intended as a comment on the resurrection of religious fundamentalism in North America over the past three to four decades. All the evils, all the know-nothingism and hate mongering that is woven through the history of religion have again been released just when it seemed that we were finally leaving them behind. In reply this account forwards a proposition of the non-existence of any supernatural beings whatsoever. It is improbable that any of the present argument will influence true believers to rethink their beliefs or to reconsider their spiritual addictions. But if nothing else this argument is intended to stand as a record of opposition to all beliefs in the supernatural.

Readers will note that this account revolves largely around Christianity and deals primarily with conditions in Euro-America since these are the regions I am most familiar with. It would have been beneficial to have a broader treatment of a wider range of religious beliefs but the material discussed may suffice. It is of course impossible to deal with most of the facets of a religious system which has been in existence for more than two thousand years. Hopefully those elements touched upon will be sufficient to make the case for a disbelief in any supernatural claims.

A point of clarification. The word 'god' is used here without the normally required capitalization -- this follows a militant nineteenth century secular tradition of not giving any such alleged entity recognition as an actual being. In addition, I normally refer to this god as 'he' rather than 'she' or 'them' but you may substitute those words if you wish without affecting the argument in any way. This usage flows from the fact that god is traditionally portrayed as male and 'he' is the usual form of reference. The word “God” in capitalized form is found only at the beginning of sentences.

There should be no mistaking the position taken here -- all religions are purely human creations which from their origin have bedeviled human beings, sometimes more seriously and other times less so. However decent their believers may be and often are what they believe in has historically been a source of great evil and a backstop for oppression. Christianity bears a special responsibility since it replaced systems of polytheism which were probably more tolerant and progressive than the religion which replaced them.

The view advanced here is one of unalloyed atheism, an active disbelief in the existence of any and all alleged supernatural entities. This approach differs from an agnostic one in that agnosticism holds that there is insufficient evidence to believe in the existence or nonexistence of any gods. It seems to me that such a view is too
timid and is partly a proposition intended to mollify the demands of religious authorities, whose views are once again prominent among decision makers. Atheism holds that there is and has long been quite sufficient evidence to decide the question and that all the facts and arguments point to a negative conclusion. This view rejects the philosophical proposition that a negative statement can never be proven. This is a ridiculous position which we by-pass every day in common speech. For instance one can say 'If you jump off a cliff you will not be suspended in mid air by immaterial forces.' That seems straightforward enough to me.

There is and never has been any believable evidence for the existence of supernatural entities. This of course depends upon what one will accept as believable evidence and what constitutes a supernatural entity. A considerable number of forces and material processes which might have seemed supernatural two hundred years ago are now comfortably housed in the realm of the physical. On the other hand, for some the claims of charlatans or the beliefs conferred through some mystical experience is all that is required to make some proposition believable. For some the ultimate 'evidence' may be an ancient text in a religious tract composed by quite ignorant individuals. Such believers may never be dissuaded by any real evidence or argument. So be it.

The role of organized religion in the world has normally been to defend the interests of the wealthy and powerful as well as to protect the realm of ignorance. If a transcendent god existed he would not necessarily be benign or compassionate nor comprehensible to humans. However there is no evidence of his presence nor of his all-pervasive capacity nor of his interest in humans, either signally or as a species. If he were all powerful he would be answerable for the endless stream of suffering and evil which besets this world. No allusion to the consequences of free will among humans affects this charge of responsibility. An atheistic approach holds that all entities for which there is no factual basis simply do not exist regardless of whatever beneficial consequences they allegedly entail. If any such god existed he certainly would not possess a mind or thought processes comprehensible to mere humans.

Stephen Hawking in his *A Brief History of Time* ends by saying that the purpose of his studies is to determine "'why it is that we and the universe exist' which would mean that then 'we would know the mind of God.' "(cited in Timothy Ferris, *The Whole Shebang*, 1997: 20). One should not take Hawking's use of the word 'God' literally, it is merely an allusion claiming the centrality of some line of research. No such undertaking as 'knowing the mind of god is possible, no matter how sophisticated the line of approach, since he/it does not exist.

What counts as a believable claim about the supernatural varies widely with the claimant and the culture he or she is a part of. In many societies, including our own until recently, a host of supernatural entities and forces were believed to exist, either on earth or somewhere out in the ether. Normally without any real evidence for them other than the claims of authority. For many the mere fact that a majority of the population believes in something or another is enough to convince them of the
correctness of such a view. For others the endlessly repeated claims for the existence of supernatural entities is adequate to preserve their belief. For many the belief in certain supernatural being(s) is acquired in childhood and often serves as a symbol of allegiance to some particular social group. No rational debate will likely change such beliefs -- regardless of how ludicrous they may be. Religious specialists over the centuries have devised allegedly persuasive arguments about the existence of gods and their commandments which appear to convince believers of their enduring truth. We will consider them in a later chapter.

There is a species of religious specialist, part actor part con man, able to attune their sermons to the gullibility of specific audiences and able to convince listeners of just about anything. Their claims are normally in support of the invisible, immaterial presence of an omniscient entity not far removed from Charlie Brown's Great Pumpkin Spirit or the commandments of the Great Flying Spaghetti Monster. No internal contradictions in dogma, no unpropitious facts, no contesting arguments ever trouble such individuals. This is especially true when substantial amounts of money and influence are involved. For many, supernatural miracles and sacred well water are the order of the day and arguments like this are totally meaningless. Questioning their beliefs is seen to be fundamentally evil.

Believers in some supernatural entity also support the, to them, clear directions their god has given about how men, women and children should comport themselves in this world. These are typically commands which were established in the distant past and revolve around maintaining life in some idealized village society. The typical requirements entail servility in the face of one’s superiors, unquestioning acceptance of meaningless rituals and the maintenance of mindless religious prohibitions. Fundamentalism is not so much conservative, which merely attempts to protect those things which are believed to have served mankind well in the past. It is more truly reactionary -- an attempt to turn social and ideational conditions back to what existed at some earlier time. Reactionary visions are invariably to the benefit of a few as opposed to those of the many.

Richard Dawkins provides a telling reply to the claim that one cannot lose by believing in the existence of a divine creator. That is if you are correct in dismissing god’s existence then you gain nothing but if you are wrong and a vengeful god like that proposed by Judeo-Christianity does exist then the costs for your soul will be eternal damnation.

"Suppose we grant that there is indeed some small chance that God exists. Nevertheless it could be said that you will lead a better, fuller life if you bet on his not existing, than if you bet on his existing and therefore squander your precious time on worshiping him, sacrificing to him, fighting and dying for him etc... readers might like to bear this in mind when we come to later chapters on the evil consequences that can flow from religious belief and observance." (R. Dawkins, 2006: 105).
In addition, if one loathes the varied forms of oppression, evil and stupidity which ensnare so many people in the name of religion, then an opposition to all gods involved is reasonable and proper. This is also the correct moral response to the existence of an evil god. But fortunately neither an evil nor a good god have ever existed.

Some would hold that while one may disparage the teachings of any given religion what benefits does atheism offer in their place? Can atheism provide solace to the grieving or a feeling of righteousness in the face of chaos? Can it provide hope that death is not the end of all being? One answer is that a disbelief in the supernatural is far better than a belief in gratuitous falsity, that what is true is preferable to a belief based on ignorance and lies. Furthermore, religion always entails a body of beliefs which decent humans should reject. Most religions contain some practices which are antithetical to human freedom and fundamental justice. The belief that some supernatural being has set commands which we as humans are required to obey has imprisoned human minds for millennia. The claim that some god has established the workings of the universe and all things in it was long a barrier to investigation and understanding of how things actually work in this world.

In fact all scientific understandings proceed on a consensus that supernatural forces cannot be appealed to in any endeavor to understand and explain worldly phenomenon. To that extent all scientific undertakings are atheistic, they discount the operation of supernatural forces in their sphere. If supernatural forces are alluded to in some explanation, to that extent the explanation is no longer scientifically valid. This applies even if some individual scientists hold that religious belief still has a role to play in some vaguely alluded to 'spiritual' understandings.

What would we think of a project to teach Judeo-Christian physics or chemistry or geography in schools? Some of course would enthusiastically welcome this, whatever it might turn out to be. That is until others evaluated the validity and reliability of such education. Those so educated might set up a nation-wide clamor about ungodly discrimination but anyone who demanded reliable and valid results would not heed those trained in Judeo-Christian sciences.

Religion has exacted a heavy price for the psychological and sociological benefits that it has claimed to provide. Would people behave any worse than they do now without a fear of some supernatural sky cop or without the hope of rebirth in some unknowable but euphoric heaven? Would crime and wars and exploitation be any greater or less? America is one of the most visibly and politically religious nations in the world yet it has a crime and murder rate, as well as a prison population which, per capita, far exceeds that of any other nation on earth. Nor has its predilection for religion and punishment made it a more liveable society. It sometimes seems to vary between being a lawless community of its wild west to being a disorganized police state.

Does religion really provide an acceptable morality or only the self-interested claims of its proponents? Does the 'morality' currently being peddled in North America largely support the police-security state which we are rapidly becoming? Is
America's odious 'justice system' and the endless propaganda supporting it a cruel joke in which anyone powerless or poor can be charged and convicted of almost any offense imaginable? Certainly that is the reality portrayed in television's 'crime and justice' serials in which people are convicted under laws which they hardly know exist. This is the 'justice' system widely supported by influential religious bodies.

Does belief in a just god and in an afterlife make death any more bearable or does it simply add unnecessary worries about whether one is 'saved' or is bound for eternal torments in hell? According to the theocracy promoted by some preachers all but the tiniest minority of even self-professed Christians are not headed for heaven; most are to be despatched down below. Only those subscribing to some very narrow interpretation of Christianity and belonging to a correct church, as well as supporting the demands of their pastors, can hope to attain salvation. Individuals who believe thusly should not to be trusted to hold any power whatsoever, either governmental or private, over others.

What kind of an omnipotent and omniscient and allegedly beneficent god would create an afterworld in which souls are subjected to eternal torture and torments for alleged sins that this creator god made them capable of committing (and sometimes enticed them into committing) in the first place? A pig ignorant god or a fiendishly evil and sadistic one or the kind of god which very young children can be persuaded into worshipping? And what of the pain and suffering this god inflicts on his creatures, man and all the others in his world? If any such creator god ever existed he must either be a sadist or one who has stepped out of the picture long ago since this world is neither just and certainly not benign.

It seems to me that if an omnipotent and omniscient god existed and was indeed responsible for the world as it is, the proper response toward such a being should be an undying resistance. Some individuals in the past probably came to such a conclusion but, while honorable, it is quite unnecessary. There simply are no gods to blame or worry about.

It seems to me that the single thing which Christianity (and Judaism and Islam) can offer their adherents is the promise of an afterlife. Hope for a euphoric afterlife is obviously quite powerful. But what decent human would want to spend eternity with a sadistic god and his earthly disciples? Total annihilation would seem far preferable.

There are some strange mental processes involved in a belief in supernatural entities, processes which I will probably never understand. While a certain proportion of the population is to some degree inherently gullible or delusional, how can it be that so many otherwise intelligent adults still believe in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, benign god who created the universe yet still cares for people individually and about what they do? Such beliefs might be comprehensible in young children or during intensely traumatic periods of life, it may even be understandable in past historic periods when there were few materialist explanations about anything. But today traditional religious belief is simply incomprehensible.

Was it the religious organizations -- the churches and priests, mullahs and imams, synagogues and rabbis, Buddhist bonzes, gurus and spiritual wonder workers of all kinds, or was it the kings and princlings, the secular rulers who determined what
most people were required to believe? Who laid the bases for the religions which permeated Europe and the Middle East and spread throughout the world in the course of history? For the past two millennia it was both forces, the secular and the religious orders, sometimes operating in opposition but more usually acting as fingers of a single hand. The Christian church became the single permitted religion in the Byzantine empire in the early to mid fourth century A.D. and for more than a thousand years attempted to retain its exclusive power.

Throughout most of its history the Christian church was in many ways like the secular institutions, with very material interests -- interests in huge landholdings, interests in tithes, interests in payments and inheritances from members of their flocks. It is quite mistaken to approach such institutions as if their operations flowed mainly or exclusively from spiritual considerations.

Furthermore, the predominant Christian churches have, at one time or another, supported almost every human evil which has existed. And I very much doubt that the rabbis and the imams and mullahs when they had the power were far different. They supported bestial forms of torture, they burned heretics and witches at the stake, they stoned people to death for engaging in minor peccadillos. They supported and facilitated slavery and they forwarded the conquests and subjugation of other humans. The crusades and jihads, holy and unholy, as well as the unending crimes of the established rulers, all were normally defended by the ruling churches.

The devotions of their flocks was all well and good but what the churches really needed and worshipped were lands and cash obtained from the wealthy through the donations of those hopefully headed for heaven. That seems to apply to most religions everywhere in Europe and in all probability elsewhere as well. Although there are some honorable exceptions the hands of most churches are indelibly stained with the blood of their victims. Those who dismiss such charges as long past history participate in redeeming the actions of the guilty in the past. In some cases they redeem those guilty of crimes against humanity in the present. Such or similar charges could probably be laid not only against Christianity but against organized religion almost everywhere.

Many believers probably accept the claims of religion as they do other demands of their society -- they worry about how to make a living and have no desire to rock the boat over matters dealing merely with sacred beliefs and holy entities. Believing in and supporting religious dogma may at times be simply taking the route of least resistance. However few now actually suffer from being known as an unbeliever -- at least not in Europe or in the Americas. To dismiss the existence of any god(s) is to also dismiss many of the prohibitions made in the name of those gods.

Some individuals may subscribe to religious beliefs because they view the costs to be low while the costs of not believing are allegedly so high -- eternal damnation in a fiery hell. Although once a good debating point I doubt that this view carries much weight currently. However the demands of religious prohibitionists are infinitely expandable and can never be fully met even if one wanted to. Give them an inch and they'll take a mile.
One must wonder about an allegedly benign god who creates a place of eternal suffering for those who have broken some 'sacred rule' which other humans, speaking in his name, have manufactured in the past. Who could love or serve such a god whose agents on earth engaged in such bestial crimes in his name? Is god ultimately responsible for creating or permitting hell to exist or are heaven and hell both nonsensical human creations? Was Lucifer the head of a band of rebellious angels cast out of heaven by a god triumphant? What accounts for the devil's powers over god's children on earth? That devil sounds like a competing god to me, a Mithra-like dark god figure. Possibly the devil's alleged followers (who usually were the fabrications of witch hunters) adhered to Satan in opposition to a god who underwrote all the suffering which mankind had to endure in this world. That would be a courageous allegiance although as ludicrous as belief in a good lord god.

Most religious believers in their daily lives can be both sagacious and decent individuals. However some of their actions during traumatic periods or when influenced by venomous hate propaganda can make them very much worse. Possibly that is not a fair criticism since atheists under the same or similar conditions can act just as badly. However it is rare to find churches which opposed heresy trials or contemporary witch hunts. Even modern churches are normally the defenders of the reigning norms of the society of which they are a part. One can hold that belief in Christianity or in the other world religions does not make people worse than they might otherwise be. However it is questionable to what extent it makes them much better. At times, listening to their religious shepherds does make them worse.

Some may hold that the comments here are directed not so much against any god as against the religious beliefs and organizations that mankind has built around him. This is partly true since the main trust here is against established religions and the endless fears, ignorance and oppression they have supported. But since religions draw their authority from the presumed commands of a particular god it is also proper to hold him to be the nominal source of such evil.

One reply might be 'However evil you may find him to be, he is still god, he must be praised and his commands must be obeyed'. My reply is that no such an entity has ever been shown to exist and that if he did it would require that decent people reject him totally. That would require a rather heroic stand to ask of people. Fortunately it is unnecessary since god does not and never has existed. After thousands of years of faith-creating and faith-peddling institutions, after the efforts of endless millions of priests, rabbis, imams, whirling dervishes, televangelists and snake-handling gospelers, none have ever produced any plausible reason to believe in the existence of god(s). Nothing at all.

Thousands of years of pontificating, theologizing and fantasizing, with no even vaguely plausible proofs, seems long enough to answer the question about the existence of any god(s). We should dispense with godly fantasy beings and his/their alleged wishes. In the last few centuries a growing number of humans, from an initially small vanguard, have acquired an incomparable treasure trove of facts, insights and scientific explanations -- most of which would never have been guessed at by any religion. Throughout history organized religion has usually attempted to
dismiss or distort any fuller scientific understanding of the world around us. Religion is and always was the backstop of know-nothingism. It may be that some scientists believe in something which they hold to be 'religious beliefs'. However if these beliefs conflict with their material findings then religious predilections must go out the window, at least on the topic under consideration, or they will cease to be scientists and become simple religious apologists. Religion (as opposed to some of the religious) has never added one iota to the understanding of the material world whatsoever.

To repeat, there has never been any believable evidence given for the existence of any gods or goddesses; not all-powerful ones nor those with delimited powers, not three-in-one gods nor elephant-headed ones or lightening-embodying entities, none whatsoever. Nor has there ever been an iota of evidence for the existence of devils or other such entities as angels or other sacred beings. These are all simply allegories, at best. But do people pray to allegories and expect their prayers to be answered? Yes, apparently they do.

Holy claims to the contrary, there never has been the slightest basis for a belief in gods, devils, souls, spirits, ghosts or anything supernatural whatsoever. This includes the wide roster of supernatural entities sustained by non-monotheistic religions. From their inception until today all such beliefs are completely mistaken, utterly human fabrications. It is long since time that they be discarded along with the other fabulous beliefs of our past.

Some anthropologists have demonstrated that certain facets of particular religions, under specific conditions, do provide certain material benefits for their practitioners. This may well be so but sustaining religious beliefs and practices have normally provided benefits to a few while loading the many with costs and restrictions they can ill afford. There are of course talented tricksters and fast talking philosophers who can weave together convincing arguments about the existence of supernatural entities and who belabor the alleged ignorance or evil of those who refuse to believe in them. There are some who could put forward convincing arguments for the existence of immaterial, invisible and undetectable cloud-eating and gravity expelling unicorns which allegedly explain the repulsive forces of outer space. If you have the stomach for it you can tune in to religious programing any Sunday morning and watch assorted pastors strut their stuff to the acclaim of the faithful.

Why this defense of atheism is written today is quite simple; it is a delayed response to the reinvigoration of right-wing Christianity, as well as reactionary Judaism and Islam over the past thirty to forty years. Religious pressure groups and sundry forms of religious militancy have arisen from what many believed to be their graves and have attained power in various places in the world. Where once we considered the Reb Meir Kahane a fanatic murderer, the Christian fundamentalist flag wavers, and the assorted Islamic jihadists as the final violent paroxysms of a dying religiosity it now appears that they have reestablished themselves and are growing
like a cancer. This book considers all such forces to be inherent enemies of humanity and all those who cater to them as opponents of human decency and freedom.

It seems that a great many patriotic American Christians and Jews have cast off any allegiances to humanity as a whole and are ready to destroy others unwilling to follow the directions of their rulers. Along with their unquenchable simple-mindedness Christian patriots support oppression at home and imperial force abroad. They hold that America is the epitome of all human desires and the goal of all human striving. One might almost believe that god is a conservative American Republican and that anyone who opposes him is in league with the devil.

After more than two thousand years of propagating religious beliefs there have been endless numbers of religious explainers. Every conceivable argument has been raised, endlessly repeated and then often forgotten. Silver tongued salesmen, wrathful heresy hunters, accomplished theologians and rationalizers of the impossible have all been heard from and their views expressed. It is quite impossible to summarize them or to present counter arguments to all of them. Hopefully those presented here will be sufficient to challenge such claims.
CHAPTER 2

Some Rationales for and Arguments about the Existence of god(s)

The following arguments for and against the existence of a god apply not just to Christianity but to all comparable claims, both those believing in a single or in multiple gods. They apply to Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and most polytheistic religions as well. When one reads the word 'god' here one may substitute 'gods' without changing the argument whatsoever. Some of the traditional reasons given for a belief in the existence of god(s) are as follow.

The argument from authority

This argument involves the claims of the Bible or some other holy book which tells us that god exists and that you had better believe it if you know what's good for you. That is the basis for the argument from authority. Allied with this proposition is the proposition that the vast majority of humanity throughout history has believed in the existence of some god(s) and to whatever rules he is said to have laid down. It is not up to individuals to question such beliefs, which indeed is a sin. Besides that, the Bible, Talmud, Koran etc. are allegedly based directly or indirectly on the words of god proclaimed to humans through his prophets or comparable holy men.

However if one does not accept the existence of any god then it is rather nonsensical to expect that one will accept the authority of holy books based upon god's alleged existence. The claim that we should believe in god because the bible tells us so is a mindless demand. If one doesn't believe in god then one certainly doesn't believe in the authority of the bible, and certainly not in its bloodthirsty and oppressive 'teachings'. The old testament is basically the story of a murderous and chauvinist people and its commandments are what we might expect from such a source.

As for the proposition that the majority of humans believe in the existence of a single god one may simply reply those people are mistaken. That 98.5 percent of Oklahomans believe in the existence of some kind of god does not make it true. Not too long ago the majority of humans believed that the earth was something less than twelve thousand years old. The great majority of mankind throughout history has been wrong about many fundamental things they believed. There is a great deal about nature and physical forces which human beings throughout history knew very little of and much of what they did believe was wrong.

A typical version of the appeal to authority argument is the way children are inculcated into religious belief. The lessons hold that "This is what we believe and you better believe it too or you'll go to hell". This 'tough love' argument' still has many faithful proponents today.
Argument from faith

There is also a view that belief in god(s) and a believer's predilections are based simply upon a faith that he exists. While this rationale is evident enough to many individuals the argument seems to lack everything as an explanation. It is mainly a rationale to fall back upon when all other arguments fail.

Faith does not fall from the heavens into receptive minds unaided by some early and repetitive teachings. The same reply involved in questioning the existence of immaterial, invisible, purple, anti-gravity expelling, flying crocodiles applies here. "Prove it." Humans can be taught to believe in almost anything, no matter how ludicrous. The fact that someone or some group believes in something is no way a proof of its existence.

The rationale of belief in god through faith may be a variant of the doctrine of belief through authority. Can 17 million Texans be wrong in their belief in an omnipotent, omniscient and benign god? Certainly they can be and usually are. This argument for the existence of a god is based upon personal intuition, someone just 'knows' or feels that a particular god exists. This is invariably the same god which others in his culture also believe in, which apparently doesn't seem strange to believers. A defensive conjunction often accompanying the argument from faith is the proposition that god and his doings are beyond human understanding. Well, if that is the case how is it that his believers always know what he wants and commands? I cannot think of any simple way to refute this claim except that to ask that 'if god is understandable how can his believers claim to know what he demands of humans, if anything?' In fact, belief in god through pure intuition is simply the consequence of early learning about alleged supernatural entities.

Intuition that something is the case may be a useful first step in the investigation of some phenomena but the proof that it is due to certain processes requires validating study. An intuition cannot serve as a proof of any claim.

The Argument from First Cause

This is an argument which holds that all things have a cause, something or some process from which it sprang. That after having gone through a long series of causes one is left with some initial thing from which all else arose. That initial condition and cause is god, says this argument. If you ask where this god came from the answer is likely to be that he is eternal. If you ask how long eternity lasts and what came before it you are likely to be told that 'eternity lasts from before the beginning until after the end of time and what came before it is that same eternal god.'

Not much of an answer but in some ways like the current account of the initial emergence' of the physical universe -- that all matter and energy exploded from an infinitely dense and tiny point and was the result of inexplicable vacuum fluctuations. In effect, that the entire cosmos and everything in it emerged from effectively nothing. At least present day cosmologists are able to give us an approximate figure of 13.7 billion years ago when the cosmos is believed to have exploded from less than
a pinpoint into a non-existent space. However that doesn't seem like an answer to 'Where did everything come from'?

If believers in a god who created all that exists wish to call a series of complicated and still only partly understood physical developments 'god' all right but such an entity would bear no resemblance whatsoever to the god which established religions have worshipped for thousands of years. He/it would not have any purposeful direction, he wouldn't necessarily have any personal interest in or involvement with mankind. There would no reason to believe in any after life, either hell or heaven, nor is it conceivable that such an entity would lay down the minutia of tribal prohibitions under which humans are supposed to live. He would simply not be god in any normal meaning of the term.

**The argument from morality**

This involves claims for the necessity of a supernatural creator to underwrite some system of human morals. (Possibly also with a heaven and a hell for those who live by or break the given rules of behavior.) The argument supposes that without such a creator and supreme judge both sacred and human laws would be changeable and unsupported by anything other than by custom and force. Merely human laws would vary from one time and from one society to another.

However that is exactly what we do find in the various moral codes in the world. Both sacred morals and human laws are infinitely flexible and changeable and have always been so. Furthermore in many cases people have only the vaguest idea of what is held to be moral and what is not. Their religious beliefs cannot always be squared with what people actually do support.

It is extraordinarily provincial to believe that those without religious belief are somehow less moral than believers; it seems to me that it is often the other way around. Holding to specific moral codes really has nothing to do with beliefs in gods - period.

Moreover what counts as 'moral' varies vastly from one society to the next and even within a single society over time. The morality of tribes involved in conflict may make killing members of the other group highly moral, a deed of great pride even. It may be viewed as an admirable deed even in our own society during wartime. Indeed some politicians over the last century have steadily regressed to a state of barbarism in which the mass murder of non-combatants during wartime has become acceptable, even patriotic. There is virtually nothing in human behavior which is uniformly held to be moral/immoral -- not cannibalism, not codes of how we should act toward our neighbors, not views about supernatural beings and their commands nor anything else. The wide diversity of human beliefs and allegiances make the usual manderings about "knowing right from wrong" totally fatuous, less than silly.

Morality is in no way god given, it depends upon the standards set by each society. That does not mean that one should accept set standards of behavior regardless of what teachers, preachers, and political hacks tell us. In some cases being 'immoral' is the moral thing to do. Of course 'evil' too is dependent upon cultural standards, what is evil in one society may be quite acceptable in another.
In any case what kind of morality have Christian churches, Jewish rabbis, Islamic mullahs and the pious of other religions defended in the past? They supported the torture and burning of heretics and alleged witches at the sake, they have defended slavery and all others forms of human oppression. They have often opposed attempts to suppress such evils. As Bertrand Russell asks in *Why I am not a Christian* (1957:25), why should we associate the very narrow band of religiously tolerated behavior with morality? "What has human happiness to do with morals? The object of morals is not to make people happy". A typical religious reply is that the purpose of morals is to make us behave as god intended us to. That very often seems to have evil consequences.

The religion which promises heaven also provides a place of eternal suffering in the after life. This too was allegedly created by the omnipotent and benign god. Only a small percentage of humanity are expected to populate heaven since being a Christian in good standing is a central requisite which few in the world possess.

Proponents of a monotheistic god usually hold that correct belief and proper religious duties in life is the sole way of being redeemed from evil and made fit for heaven. To be saved from the torments of hell and to achieve everlasting life is the end of some religions. Not on earth of course but in some other worldly heaven which no one has ever experienced or can vouch for. An after-life in heaven is the one way of defeating death, it is claimed. That is a pretty powerful promise but it is merely a fabulous hope, a quite unrealistic belief given all the evidence. Such an ultimate home only applies to the disembodied soul in any case, which we have no reason to believe actually exists. Some of course are sure that the soul exists. No evidence is required.

**Argument from revelation**

This is a proof of god's existence as verified through personal revelation, i.e. the personal experience of his/it's existence. The person saw him, heard him, had a message from him (possibly in some unbalanced mental state such as the hallucinations of incipient psychosis). Such revelation not only applies to god and his commandments but also to the personal experience of devils, spirit bears, ghosts and other supernatural entities which the observer holds to be divine in various cultural contexts. As in completely non religious hallucinations.

One may be convinced of the existence of a god(s) through personal revelation but such experience can have no relevance to those who have not experienced the same thing themselves. You may tell me that you have been personally contacted by a group of divine harp seals playing poker on a celestial sailing ship drifting through the horse latitudes and that you have been given precise instructions on what foods humans are forbidden to eat on pain of eternal damnation. You may even believe that revelation unto your dying breath -- but there is no reason why others who have not had this holy message revealed to them should believe you. However there are hundreds of millions of seemingly sane people in the world who take other people’s 'holy revelations' as evidence for the existence of a god.
In short, the personal testimony of someone's direct experience of god is no more reliable and is no greater evidence of his existence than any strongly held fantasy. Given a culture of belief in gods and spirits it is not surprising that believers hear messages from imagined supernatural beings from time to time, especially during periods of stress. What is surprising is that god's orders are always fully understood by the listener and that the divine commands so closely resemble the believers' own predilections.

**The Ontological argument**

If I understand it the ontological argument runs this way: Imagine the greatest, most powerful, most sublime entity you can. (I can't but allegedly others can.) Now imagine that that entity is real, since reality is more existential and truer than anything simply imagined. That is god, the most sublime real entity imaginable! We here presume that no one else has imagined a yet more powerful entity which he can convince others into believing.

But haven't you simply imagined god into existence? One might ask "What of tiny pink elephants which can dance classical ballet while singing 'God Save the King' in pig Latin, do they also have an ontological existence"? Walt Disney's creators of *Fantasia* could not only imagine them but depict them on screen. The fact that something can be imagined and named and described says nothing about whether it actually exists, it seems to me. This is an argument first put forward in the 11th century by an English monk and it sounds like it.

In any case this argument doesn't entail or require anything like a personal god who sets standards for humans to emulate, who keeps track of their doings, or is even particularly concerned with the evolution of life in the cosmos. Is this the kind of argument for the existence of god which a thousand years of Christianity came up with?

**Argument from Natural Law**

Bertrand Russell, in *Why I Am Not A Christian* (1957: 16-18), provides a discussion of the existence of god by the argument of natural law. This proposition was prevalent in the eighteenth century, but is little heard today. It notes that there are certain established natural laws, like those of gravity or those of chemical combinations which were believed to be ultimate facts for which there were no deeper causes or explanations. That 'natural laws', the argument went, 'are both god given and also prove the existence of a god' who created them. An example might be that a sufficient amount of water would extinguish any fire, which we see today as incorrect when we consider fires sustained by thermite for instance.

As the underlying bases of many of the so-called 'natural laws' were discovered, particularly the statistical nature of many of them, this argument for the existence of god fell into disrepute. In any case there still remained the question of why god chose to create the particular natural laws he did. One theological reply might be that the ways of god are unknowable, a devious answer which is weakened by claimants who believe that they do know what god demands from humans.
Another position might be that life is only possible with those natural laws of physics and chemistry in existence which god had established. That the purpose of the universe was to bring forth and sustain human life. Since the overwhelming majority of the cosmos is and will always remain lifeless one may wonder if there was not a less wasteful means of creating a universe in which life would emerge -- especially if the creator is as all powerful and all knowing as he is claimed to be. In any case the argument for the existence if god from natural law in no way requires or supports the kind of god which Christianity or any of the other world religions propose.

The Argument from Design

There also is that old favorite argument for the existence of a godly designer of the universe. One version of this proposition goes this way; "If you consider a clock you do not presume that it arose and came together by chance but that it was constructed by some intelligent maker so why would you believe that much more complex entities like trees or entire ecosystems do not have a designer"?

A reasonable answer to that is that the creator of specific trees are other trees of the same species and not gods. Moreover the ancestral trees emerged from progressively different evolutionary ancestral trees, and so on through a host of minor changes which created new species and genera.

One of the versions of the argument from design revolves around the alleged irreducible complexity of certain natural entities -- the construction of a functioning eye is probably the most frequently used example. This is a common counter argument to evolutionary explanations. As the story goes any functioning eye depends upon a closely coordinated host of special structures all of which would have to appear at the same time for an eye to be at all functional and useful. It dismisses the proposition that the evolution of the eye (or any similar structure) could have evolved bit by bit through incremental changes, all of which would have been somewhat useful on their own.

Eyes are a favorite example for this argument because they do not fossilize and therefore are not part of the evolutionary fossil record. Dawkins sardonically calls this argument from design "the worship of gaps"; every gap in the record of an evolutionary sequence is allegedly an insurmountable one (2006: 125). However there are some still living organisms which continue to represent past evolutionary changes and as a matter of fact do indicate many of the incremental changes which have taken place in the evolution of eyes. Each evolutionary change provides some visual improvement to the eye's distinguishing powers. Naturally we rarely have all the cumulative steps necessary to document all the stages but there are enough still living examples, from light sensitive spots in lower organisms to photoreceptors which can give the blurry outlines of nearby shapes to various different types of well functioning eyes. Taken together they factually disprove the 'irreducible complexity' argument. This argument was typically used against the validity of Darwinian evolution and its alternate answer was the proposition that some godly optometrist
had been at work to design a functioning eye. It is based on a fundamental ignorance of the facts in evidence.

A related argument is that the intricate living entities in the world could not have appeared in such complexity without some creator. This argument from intelligent design involves the existence of god as the designer and creator of our world. One might counter with an argument for a thoroughly unintelligent design. Consider all the millions of once living species which have died out during the history of the world. How could an omniscient and omnipotent god have created all those species only to have them die out over time? Does he have a changeable mind, a taste for novelty or an experimental urge? Or is he an entity who has to see how things turn out before he allows them to proceed?

Another counter argument for the existence of a godly designer might be a consideration of all the failings human and other animal bodies have. How could an omniscient and benign god create creatures who recurrently suffer from severe back pains or any of the other physical failings to which the human body is heir?

The facts of evolutionary history argue for unintelligent design, for the undirected and gradual selection of certain changes over godly creation -- of initially random changes some of which are beneficial and through differential survival cumulatively change species. That physical change is the result of the interaction between individuals with their specific environments. The differential number of offspring they leave behind them.

Believers in intelligent design also envision a god who is extraordinarily narrow minded. This quality probably endears him to such believers but makes it seem unlikely that such an entity could have created anything at all. The facts of evolutionary history argue for unintelligent evolutionary changes and not godly creation.

Most of what naturalists and scientists have discovered over the last few centuries goes far beyond the creation tales presented in the bible or any other religious text about the will of god. Even a layman's knowledge of, let us say the structure of the cosmos, is far in advance of any religious account ever known.

The complexity of life forms increases as species emerge and evolve over eons. For billions of years there were only simple single-celled organisms, then simple multi-celled ones, then animals with backbones and increasingly complex nervous systems and so on. Looking back at tens or hundreds of millions of years of evolution the 'end product' of living organisms may appear to be, and often is, quite complex so that it may seem that it could only have been created by some omniscient entity. But a complete picture of the evolution of such complexity should persuade us of the un necessity of any divine intervention required. The end product of evolution may be extraordinarily complex, but the roster of changes required to reach such complexity is far more comprehensible. And we often have examples of many of such changes available for study in creatures still alive today.

**The Anthropic argument**
This is a current favorite argument about the existence/non existence of god. It goes something like the following. Proposition: "If certain fundamental physical forces were not set within very narrow limits then either the universe would not exist or it would be composed of nothing but a thin, highly dispersed vapor of hydrogen and helium gas. Neither life nor most chemical activity would be possible."

Answer: "Well then the universe wouldn't be as it is and humans wouldn't be around to note it. So what? There were endless possibilities for the non existence of the cosmos as it is or for the non existence of life in it. But in fact it is so constituted that life can develop in some places. We should consider the range of physical forces which allow this to be so. There may have been millions of universes with their own physical settings which emerged but did not last before ours."

The anthropic principle starts with the existence of life on earth and then asks what are the conditions needed for it to exist. This engenders some fundamental questions about nature of life and its requirements. The principle is attributed to a British cosmologist Brandon Carter in 1974 and seems to convert a philosophical question into a scientific one.

Astrophysicist Timothy Ferris in his The Whole Shebang, A state of the universe report says of the anthropic principle that it "...attempts to constrain facts about the universe by taking into account our presence here. To 'constrain' means in this context, to improve our ability to calculate the odds of nature being the way it is, by reducing its potential states from an infinite number to the much smaller set of states in which it is possible for life to exist." (1997: 298).

If some basic forces of the cosmos had been slightly different then they are there would have been no possibility of life to form anywhere. Closer to home on earth, if different processes had taken place initially then the entire chain of evolutionary development would have been totally different. Again an appropriate reply might be 'Possibly not, but so what? Any number of evolutionary processes could have taken place and not resulted in intelligent life on earth. There is no foreordained reason why we or anything like us should exist, we are just the current end product of those developments which did in fact take place'. We do not yet know under what range of initial conditions life emerges. Elsewhere it may be different from what occurred on earth. If the conditions for the emergence of life only exist in one in a thousand or one in a million star systems, then we are one of that number. None of these developments require any godly intervention.

However anyone determined to locate a creator god through the anthropic proposition could still reply, "Yes but some sort of purposeful entity did determine the required settings of existing physical forces and the developments which flowed from them". This however is a very long way from the nature of any traditional god I know of and entails no lessons in morality for human beings. In fact it does not require that human beings actually emerge from the extant evolutionary processes. So if anyone wants to call the existing parameters of the physical forces in the universe 'god' let them. It would be like worshipping the force of gravity and it doesn't have any real consequences as far as I can determine.
The Argument from Human Consciousness

Carl Sagan ("The God Hypothesis" in C. Hitchens, *The Portable Atheist*, 2007: 234) in his elegant and lucid manner, considers an argument for the existence of god from the fact of human consciousness. 'I think therefore God must exist. How else could consciousness have come into being?' He notes that self directed behavior has been found in earthworms learning through electric shocks to travel in one direction rather than another and even of phototropic microorganisms moving toward light sources. "They had that information in their hereditary material. It's encoded into their genes and chromosomes. Well, did God put that information there, or might it have evolved through natural selection?" Sagan spells out what the selective aspects of such inborn skills are and goes on to speak of the neurological capacities of more complex animals.

".... the general view of many, not all, neurobiologists is that consciousness is a function of the number and complexity of neural linkages of the architecture of the brain. Human consciousness is what happens when you get to something like $10^{11}$ neurons and $10^{13}$ synapses... So at least it does not seem to me that the argument from consciousness, a continuum of consciousness through the plant and animal kingdom, proves the existence of God. That has no bearing on whether godly entities were required for life to exist or not'. We have an alternative explanation that seems to work pretty well.' (2007: 235)

Even if some superlative cosmos-creating entity did establish the initial parameters of physical forces which permit this cosmos to exist, our universe has changed a great deal from its inception. Many things have emerged during the last 14 billion years, including certain planets which can sustain life and the ever changing life forms on them. Is it reasonable to suppose that any initiating intelligence could have possibly foreseen all the endless trillions upon trillions of consequences of what was initially established? It seems to me that to do so would carry claims of godly omniscience into the realm of the totally impossible.

Moreover to hold that some creator-entity established the fundamental physical principles of the universe says nothing about his role in establishing the things which concern most people on earth. There might be stringent limits on the powers of a creator to intervene once the universe is set running. To talk of god is simply an anthropomorphistic way to allude to the mindless physical forces of the universe which emerged.

If the creation and maintenance of life is held to be the fundamental purpose in the cosmos then it is an atrociously inefficient process which the god(s) are engaged in. Endless billions of planets and 100+ billion stars in our galaxy alone -- why bother to create them all when life can only exist on the tiniest fraction of them? One answer may be that "Because that's how gods do things".

It is sufficient to note that 'life is just the outcome of an evolutionary process which has and had no predetermined goal and certainly is not forwarded by any god.
God and the creation of the cosmos

When god came to creating the earth -- why did so many millions of species have to emerge and die out in order to create the life now existing? Was god experimenting or was he just wasteful, why did he require so many millions of species which eventually all died out? And what about all the flaws in the design of human beings, their openness to invasion by parasitic, often lethal micro-organisms, the flaws in human eyesight or back muscles or heart or lungs or a thousand other features of individuals? He must be a rather slip-shod designer. I wouldn't want to travel in an aircraft designed by him.

Moreover why is it that god was so wasteful with all the matter and energy he had created? The overwhelming majority of the cosmos is totally unfit for any kind of life -- all the stars both large and small, all the cosmic dust in between the stars, the black holes and neutron stars, the clouds of comets with life sustaining water locked away on the distant edge of star systems. Most of the planets themselves are all superfluous for life. If he designed the cosmos for life, ultimately for human life, why is there so much material on which there can be no life? Possibly one part per billion at best can sustain life. Why did the materials of our solar system have to wait some 4.5 billion years, after previously going through two distinct phases of element formation in two earlier super-massive stellar explosions and dispersals which lasted more billions of years? And why did god wait until the last 1 to 2 million years, out of a total of almost 14 billion years from the birth of the universe, before the first primitive Hominids appeared on earth? Was all this wasted matter and energy and time really part of some divine plan? Everything that we do now know for certain is knowable to us through science, which continues to expand our understandings, whereas spiritual approaches do not.

There are many other arguments given for the existence of god and you can discover some of them for yourself. For instance the argument from the existence of something admirable or beautiful: 'There is a god because there is beauty and goodness in the world'. But concepts of beauty and goodness vary from one society to another; does that mean there are multiple gods? Moreover what about the existence of ugliness and evil? Or 'God is love'. But people love all kinds of different things, including doing evil and harm to others. Having such a sentiment about something or someone does not require the presence of some god, does it? Also the argument from majority belief: 'There is a god because so many humans have believed in one (some) for so long'. But people also believed the world was flat and the sun revolved around it for the longest time, too. Most people in the world have been wrong in much of what they believed.

There is also the argument from some good fortune: 'There is a god because my aunt Daisy Mae prayed to win the lottery and after 35 years of buying tickets and praying she actually did win the third prize in one.' However others also played and prayed but didn't win; does that mean there is no god for them? There is also the argument from ignorance: "There must be a god because there are things which happen which can't be explained otherwise." But fairly simple things cannot be
understood by some people, that doesn't mean they are unexplainable, now or in the future. There is as well the argument from scripture 'There is a god because the Bible tells me so'. But biblical scripture was thought up and written down by humans, fairly barbaric ones at that. That the bible, which allegedly is the word of god, should proceed on a proposition that a god exists is simply a statement not a proof. This argument was more prevalent when literacy was uncommon and when almost anything written was considered to be near sacrosanct. There is the argument from nature: 'Humans are naturally inclined to a belief in gods and other supernatural entities'. But humans are also naturally inclined to be infected by smallpox and a host of other contagious diseases. In any case 'natural sentiments' even if they exist are not necessarily true. There is also the argument from consolation: 'Religion and god offer consolation for those troubled or bereaved, beset by loneliness and despair'. Possibly so but that does not involve any proof about the existence a god or an afterlife. Finally the view that evil and foolish people do not believe in god. Therefore if you want to be known as wise and good you must believe in him. Although logically absurd this claim makes some psychological sense: My own disbelief in the non existence of any god initially flowed from something like the above proposition. That is, 'people who actively believe in a god and try to foist their belief on others are generally more prone to evil than those who don't. Therefore god doesn't exist'. Admittedly not a very logical stance.

All of the above propositions proceed with an unstated claim that the god being presented is a benign one, concerned with humans and human life. His concern apparently isn't with the vast array of other creatures he has also created. They live and die without god's slightest concern. However there is the possibility that the supreme god is an evil and sadistic one, one who has created mankind so that he can witness them suffering, murdering and oppressing each other. And dying from hunger and disease as they have throughout human history. That kind of a god makes as much sense as a benign one.

There are endless more arguments for the existence of god, none of them at all persuasive. Long ago I listened to a PhD candidate in anthropology give a talk on his thesis, which involved the many cultural and ecological phenomena effecting the incidence of malaria in different locales. At one point he said, probably sardonically, that while he previously had qualms about the existence of a god he was thoroughly disabused of any such belief on learning that there were circa 1,500 distinct species of mosquitos currently existent on earth. 'Why such blood sucking excess on the part of a benign creator?' This may be an argument for unintelligent design or of a creator who doesn't know and doesn't care what he is doing.

If one has spent any time in the Canadian north during the summer, with only a dozen or so species of black flies, mosquitos and house flies, one probably would come to a similar conclusion -- unless you opted for the view that the region was dedicated as an abode of Beelzebub.

Richard Dawkins on Pascal's Wager
Dawkins in his *The God Delusion* (2006: 103-104) offers a reply to the proposition by 18th century French mathematician Blaise Pascal to the effect that believing in god is a winning wager since if he doesn't exist you lose nothing by believing in him but that if he does exist then your disbelief may commit you to hell eternal. That is Pascal's wager and was once prominent among many promulgators of belief in the holy. Dawkins' reply is that no one can determine what some person truly believes, only what a person claims to believe. But that an omniscient god would certainly see through anyone's deception and one would not be any further ahead if god cast unbelievers into hell. One might hold that god did not provide enough evidence for humans to believe in him but that probably wouldn't cut much ice with a god who created a hell for the eternal punishment of humans he had created capable of mortal sin.

In addition Dawkins suggests that belief in supernatural entities is not cost free. It requires time in learning the official views of a religion, it costs in donations and sacrifices to that entity and the time spent in prayer and in other religious duties. Moreover (and probably most important) religions normally have a highly restrictive set oh beliefs about the world which their adherents must subscribe to. Traditionally those proscriptions ruled out many scientific undertakings. Dawkins notes that god, if he existed, might prefer an upright disbelief than a cringing believer. Finally he notes the possibility that it may be a god like Baal who confronts you after death who would not particularly admire puritan abnegation. After all there have been thousands of gods which humans have believed in. Some of them might be more provoked by a believer in Yahweh or Allah or God Almighty than they are by a nonbeliever in any gods. All this of course is a pseudo debate about the nature of a nonexistent entity.

Dawkins provides some examples of sardonic arguments for the existence of god; one of which I will paraphrase as follows: 'A Colombian passenger aircraft crashes into a mountainside killing its crew and 143 of its 144 passengers but one infant survives, although badly burned. 'It's a miracle' the Colombian press agrees. Therefore god exists'. Nobody could ask the 143 dead passengers and crew if this disaster proved the existence of god to them. This is not as self-evidently ridiculous a parody as it may appear since versions of the above are still readily accepted by many.

Most polytheistic religions have less difficulty explaining the character and behavior of their gods and goddesses. These gods are often cast in anthropomorphic form with desires not too different from those prevalent in human society, i.e the one in which the believers live. Such gods are often hierarchically ordered, sexually demanding, and sometimes warlike and authoritarian, depending on the sort of society in which they are found. The resemblance of god(s) and his/their doings is related to the nature of the society in which he/they are found. This also applies in monotheistic religions. In any case the gods of most polytheistic religions do not usually claim to be shepherds of mankind nor do they necessarily have mankind's interests at heart. They may be envious, unjust, sometimes easily fooled, and are not necessarily omniscient or all-powerful. Often they are not there when their devotees need them. They are changeable and a few occasionally die.
To return to Carl Sagan's "The God Hypothesis" (2007) he suggests some other alternatives to the single omniscient, all-powerful all-present god of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition.

"Now think of all the possibilities: worlds without gods, gods without worlds, gods that are made by preexisting gods, gods that were always here, gods that never die, gods that do die, gods that die more than once, different degrees of divine intervention in human affairs, zero, one or many, prophets, zero, one or many saviours, zero, one or many, resurrections, zero, one or many gods, and related questions about sacrament, religious mutilation and scarification, baptism, monastic orders, ascetic expectations, the presence of an afterlife, days to eat fish, days not to eat at all, how many afterlives you have coming to you, justice in this world or the next world or in no world at all, reincarnation, human sacrifice, temple prostitution, jihads and so forth. It's a vast array of things that people believe. Different religions believe different things. There's a grab bag of religious alternatives." (2007: 228)

That is well said.

However one should be careful when analyzing behavior described as 'customary religion', especially if it involves considerable amounts of effort or goods to support it -- particularly in impoverished societies. It may turn out that aspects of certain religious systems are critical in materially helping their participants survive in a given locale. Quite a number of 'functional' claims have been proposed by anthropologists for the alleged social consequences of certain religion's practices. It might be wise to consider some of the material consequences of religious behavior as well.
CHAPTER 3

Some Alleged Functions of Religion

Bertrand Russell in one of his collected essays remarks that the religious today (of the mid 1950s) invariably remark on how free worship is in Great Britain, where no one is bullied into holding particular religious beliefs or praying in any set manner. "Well" says Russell, "you only have to look back to the period of my [his] childhood to discover how unfree the typical English parish was". Perceptions of god and the practices allegedly required by him were quite narrowly set and accepted. He remembers his grandfather, still living when Bertrand was a boy, and how he had been virtually disowned by the community he lived in because he was known as being a 'free thinker.' And he was of the gentry class. The grandson, then in his late seventies, notes that religious belief is only comparatively free today because of the struggles and resistance of those who came before us.

What are some of the anthropological views about religion? Since this field provides a very broad survey of the topic it can serve as an overview. Although I rarely pursued investigations into religious practices in my own field work, some anthropological propositions may be of interest. It should be noted that discussion of the 'functions of religion' does not imply any consideration of the truth or validity of such propositions. These functions allegedly apply to whatever religion or set of sacred beliefs are under consideration. The consequences allegedly flow from what people believe and not whether they are correct or fallacious.

There was once a prominent school of anthropology called 'functionalism' which held that determining the 'function' of any block of behavior was the main task in providing an explanation of whatever was investigated. Just as there were hundreds of specific usages of the word 'culture' so too with the word 'function', almost each study used some variant of the term.

Roughly speaking the function of some cultural behavior revolved around specifying what beneficial results those practices produced for their practitioners. It is in some ways similar to the word 'adaptive' when used in ecological/evolutionary studies. The difference is that serious ecological studies investigate the specific, determinable, consequences of some cultural behavior to gauge whether it is beneficial to its practitioners or not. This was something which functionalist anthropologists rarely did. Their proposition of functional consequences rarely
entailed any evidence. Instead they expatiated on the ethnocentrism of those doubting claims about the benefits claimed for certain blocks of cultural behavior.

Functionalist explanations were often dismissed because there usually was no reliable test for the beneficial consequences of the practices under consideration. One often had the feeling that almost anything went in such claims. Functionalists gloried in proposing little expected consequences of the practices under study -- the trouble was that claiming specific benefits had to be usually taken on faith because there was rarely any hard evidence provided. When stumped for some benefits to claim functionalists frequently retreated into holding that some cultural practice strengthened 'social solidarity' between its practitioners. Non western people were apparently awash in social solidarity-producing acts, even when little solidarity was in evidence. It should be noted that the following discussion of alleged functions of religion are quite different from the above.

The proposed functions of religion do not say anything about the actual existence of any supernatural entities. Even with recourse to cultural relativism it would be difficult for most anthropologists to believe in the existence of many of the spiritual entities involved in the disparate religions under study. To repeat, the functions suggested below only require that most people believe in the spiritual entities and processes discussed.

Marvin Harris, one of the leading anthropologists of the twentieth century, had this to say about the functions of religion.

"There is no single unifying theme underlying all religions. All religions are multi-functioned: they provide psychological comfort in times of distress, they help people make sense out of inexplicable events, they provide common goals, rules of conduct, and a sense of communion for the members of social groups, and they provide expressive outlets for the joys and sorrows of human existence. But there is no uniformity in the way these functions are fulfilled. All religion do not, for example, ward off the threats of death with the idea that the soul is immortal, nor do all religions preach the sanctity of human life, the oneness of the universe, or the goodness of God. Religions are as diverse as the cultural systems in which they are embedded" (Harris, Marvin, *Culture, People, Nature, An introduction to General Anthropology*, 1976: 547).

However it may also be that religion often provides no or few functional benefits at all, that it is mainly a compendium of mistaken beliefs and false superstititions stemming from an earlier era when humans knew very little about the universe and how things in it operate. Religion may largely be a collection of myths, fears and hopes which some specialists perform for those desperate to believe in an all-powerful tooth fairy.

There has been a long string of mistaken or only partially true beliefs in science as well. What distinguishes science from religion is that scientific propositions must not
only correctly answer certain questions about an object or process but be open to verifiable tests and disconfirmation -- while religious propositions do not require any validating tests whatsoever and normally do not permit disconfirmation.

So it is with some trepidation that I will reproduce some alleged benefits entailed in religious belief.

1. A usual initial comment is that virtually all societies contain religious and sacred practices, that religion in the broadest sense is a human universal. Well, that kind of depends on what one considers to be religious or sacred. Past anthropologists were loath to hold that any group of humans had no religion, a view they felt was somehow demeaning. Since there are few things in past or present human cultures which are truly universal such pervasiveness might suggest a human requirement for religion.

However the nature of sacred beliefs and activities vary enormously and in some societies religion and the supernatural may be viewed rather pragmatically, something like the knowledge one needs to keep an old auto running or keeping a plot of hill rice productive over longer periods. In non-state societies specific rituals and beliefs may be performed by all members of a group. Typically, different people have different ideas about the exact procedures and rituals and reasons for various rites.

In pre-state (primitive) societies cultural activities are not as highly specialized or as clearly distinguishable as they later became. For instance, catching and preserving salmon by indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest in earlier times would entail elements of kinship duties and allegiances, the ownership rights to specific fishing sites, the technology and skills involved in taking and preserving fish, division of labour by age and sex and a host of other cultural procedures all mixed in with ritual treatment relating to the salmon caught. Assorted supernatural beliefs surrounded the whole enterprise which in many cases were inextricably interwoven with pragmatic ones. It is often difficult to divorce one sphere from the other.

Therefore one should be hesitant to describe people in such cultures as bound by the web of religious beliefs which they do in fact sustain. People's beliefs can be quite selective and changeable when appealing to traditional and sacred ways of doing things. The same applies to our own ancestors until relatively recently. Those enamored of the conservative qualities of religion should realize that aspects of the sacred may be quite changeable.

2. Another anthropological view of religion, one broadly subscribed to, is that religion is a mirror of the society in which it occurs. Those living in patriarchal societies tend to have patriarchal gods, those whose lives depend upon the arrival of seasonal rains tend to have important religious rituals to bring on that rain or spirits to thank for delivering them. Societies which are riven by internal struggle over particular rights often have a heightened fear of witchcraft and similar forces which human rivals may direct against each other. A hierarchical and class organized society, such as those which produced the three world religions, normally has a hierarchy of ordered spiritual beings much in the character of the extant human relations
One of the problems facing churches, synagogues, mosques, temples and other religious organizations is that extant society may change from that on which the religion was founded and which it mirrors. The heavenly order may no longer reflect that visible in the real world. The Catholic church is a prime example of that in the western world. Throughout much of Europe from before the middle ages and on, the church supported feudal interests and often was the wealthiest land owner in a given region. This often did not square with its demands for poverty, chastity and total spiritual obedience by its priests.

Some religious establishments can go on rejecting rational and scientific insights for a very long time. The Catholic church's ban on the use of contraceptives by the faithful is probably the currently best known traditionalist imposition on its followers. Although not all conservatism is necessarily detrimental and not all changes are for the better, certain situations are better for some and worse for others. There can be little doubt that certain churches were fundamentally opposed to significant social change for centuries and have legitimately acquired a reputation as defenders of the status quo ante.

3. Established religions normally are conservative, both in their own dogmas and in their influence on the societies they are a part of. There are some debates about this view, with certain observers holding that systems of supernatural belief may recurrently break with established behavior and belief. But it seems to me that such cases are very much the exceptions. The conservative nature of most religion accounts for the frequent alliances between political reactionaries and specific churches. Some established churches are not only conservative by the standards of their own day but support the reestablishment of conditions as they had once been. This is what it is to be reactionary.

However the belief systems of simpler societies can often appear more conservative then they actually may be. Hidden within the cloak of conservatism there may be strategically important interests being protected. One of the clearest cases of this is the Hindu doctrine of Ahimsa which especially forbids the slaughter of cattle. In particular it forbids the killing of cows and sustains the maintenance of cows in peasant families -- this being crucially important in Indian peasant agriculture. In this case phenomena usually treated as 'religious' or 'traditional' may in fact be viewed more saliently as related to quite different economic-ecological processes.

4. For far too long anthropologists and sociologists held that religion served to create social solidarity among its believers. This proposition was hauled out when nothing better could be said about some particular beliefs or practices. Indeed the alleged role of many social institutions were held to be connected to maintaining social solidarity when no other functional purpose could be found. There was no measure and no test of such propositions at all. There was never any quantifiable measure of the costs of the social practices discussed, the conflicts incurred, the entrenched fantasies sustained, the misdirection of believers from learning about how the real world is constituted.
In fact it sometimes required some daring to hold that certain religious practices and beliefs had no social functions at all, none that are generally beneficial for its believers. None that are worth the efforts and costs entailed in sustaining them. For instance the allegedly social solidarity producing consequences of religious festivals in village Mexico can also result in increased hostilities. It seems, in fact, that such festivities are basically geared to the benefit of the reigning church, not the people at all.

5. Religion can offer support to the established rulers of a given society. It can impose allegedly supernaturally given laws upon those whom the secular law could not always control. The social function of religion in such cases is the maintenance of social control. This may not be to the benefit of those being controlled. Whether Christianity or the other major religions normally serve to defend the contemporary rulers or not is somewhat difficult to say. They may not do so universally but organized religion soon comes to project a godly respect for the sanctity of established power and property, a feature which becomes a recurrent theme in its moral teachings. Some may treat this as a function of religion, to act as a defense against anarchic sentiments and actions. But who do such 'functions' protect?

6. Beliefs in supernatural entities vary widely; belief in a single or multiple god(s), belief in the existence of eternal souls or of a spiritual afterlife, all these and much more vary from one religion to another. Certain religious beliefs which are held to be universal are in fact mainly restricted to three of the four world religions which have spread around the world in the last two thousand years.

In many systems of belief individual souls, even ghosts and ancestral spirits, ultimately wither away and disappear over time. In some systems of supernatural beliefs humans have multiple souls which go their own separate ways after death. In yet other societies, such as some of the pre-Christian religions of Europe, the great majority of humans simply die with no prospects of an afterlife at all. Only the souls of a small handful of heroes and leaders survive death and are carried upward to some afterlife. In the classic Greek accounts the souls of the dead are ferried across the river Styx by a boatman who delivered them to a dim and dreary underworld where they gradually fade away. Most religions do not make eternal room for the souls of the dead. Practically speaking, souls of the dead normally survive as long as those still living remember them.

Different religious belief systems manage to create almost every kind of spiritual entity imaginable. This is only possible because we are dealing with imaginary entities, which can be imagined as having any variety of shapes, character, purposes, destinies and so forth. It requires little effort or resources to have them be anything one likes or fears. If it is all imaginary believers can envision whatever they like in the next world.

7. Regardless of whether Marx actually said it or whether someone said it in his name the view that "religion is the opiate of the masses" still rings true for many who consider the consequences of religious belief. This is specially so for believers of the monotheistic religions -- Christian, Islamic, and Jewish. This view presumes that people would otherwise be more ready to throw off the spiritual yoke which binds
them, that their hope for a heavenly afterworld reduces their struggle for a better world here on earth. One wonders to what extent that is actually so since what truly binds people in their place are not basically supernatural beliefs but the earthly rules of the society they are a part of.

That Marxist proposition was made in mid nineteenth century Europe where working people existed in a kind of an industrial serfdom. A Europe in which the lives of the working poor were often cut short by malnutrition, by overwork, by disease and by miserable and incredibly crowded working and living conditions. It was also a world in which increasing numbers of people were entering the variegated working class. Until the last half of the 20th century that class seemed to be growing everywhere, although it was apparently no longer true in some regions. The growth and the interests of the working class was the fundamental hope of socialists who foresaw the ultimate liberation of humanity from the bonds which had bound it for so long. The promise was that "The earth shall rise on new foundations."

This hope has now splintered into a multitude of separate, often competing factions, bounded by ethnicity, by religious sectarianism, by divisive nationalisms, by increasingly narrow interest groups, by gender and age and race. Indeed, many of the quasi white collar class may now resent being considered a part of the working class although that is exactly who they are.

It may be more accurate to describe religion as the opiate of some of the working class in certain nations. It is based on an irrationality and an obedience to what they are told by their superiors, as well as a contempt for any views other than those imposed upon them. This may be particularly true for proponents of fundamentalist Christianity. The messages extracted from quite disparate elements of the Christian text may be interpreted to mean that some are the natural rulers of the world while others are their natural servants and that anyone who challenges that view should be suppressed.

8. Religion is often said to be multi-functional, as having many different reasons for existing. Some anthropologists have suggested a host of material reasons why certain sacred and seemingly irrational beliefs exist in different societies. They often propose quite secular and not at all obvious advantages protected by certain sacred rules in various societies.

What is loosely termed 'religious belief' may entail acts and prohibitions which have material consequences in every day arenas. Suggestions made by some anthropologists indicate how certain religious practices can have observable, testable material consequences. One of the most persuasive examples of the above is a series of articles by Marvin Harris which countered the once near universal view that the sacred cattle of India were inexplicably protected by Hindu religious doctrines and have allegedly filled the land with useless animals. However these 'sacred cows' have fundamental roles in peasant farming. They produce the traction animals (oxen) required by Indian plough agriculture. The root of the problem, said many observers, was the doctrine of Ahimsa, the Hindu belief of the sacredness of all life and of the special sacredness of cows. Harris set out to debunk this once universally misunderstood phenomena.
This particular case will be discussed more fully in a later chapter. Let it only be said here that to evaluate the usefulness of cattle in India as meat providers, or by some other western standard of agricultural efficiency, completely misses the role which cattle actually play in Indian agriculture. Making cows sacred and religiously barring them from being slaughtered was a way of protecting such necessary animals. The Hindu beliefs about sacred cows are based upon the material role they play in the entire agricultural economy.

Such an ecological approach does not deal with religion or sacred practices in any uniform way because there are a host of different ecological conditions involved. Similarly so the benefits which may be entailed in some religious practices. It is not held that all religious practices have a beneficial basis. This is nothing like talking about the social functions of religion, it does not suggest that all or most aspects of religious practice support beneficial material consequences. This approach merely suggests that anything described as holy or sacred can be investigated in regard to what the costs and what the benefits are and who normally gets them.

In the case to be dealt with we are treating with what are traditionally termed religious or prestige aspects of the culture involved. We note that they are sometimes closely linked to ecological processes -- indeed it sometimes seems that such material consequences are sometimes more important than the religious aspects involved. However the 'religious' beliefs and motivations involved may be an important part of the process. 'Sacred' reasons for the practices involved may motivate and help protect the undertakings from being undercut by those seeking personal and short term advantages.

9. Sigmund Freud long ago suggested that in western religions (during the 19th and early 20th centuries at least) god was an authority figure moulded in a caricature of patriarchal authority. He allegedly was a consequence of child rearing in such a society, which Freud mistakenly implied was similar everywhere.

When the child or infant is acquiring his/her most fundamental beliefs and language, from before two to five years of age, a subconscious belief in the existence of a supernaturally powerful figure is formed. That is the child's view of parents or nurse or some other actual authority figure in its childhood. In those early years the basis for believing in some supernatural entity who sets rules but also watches over us in some protective manner is established. Belief in god(s) is an extension of an early infantile understanding of the world. However Freud did not deal with supernatural beliefs in societies where children are raised in a less authoritarian manner, with many individuals participating in his/her socialization.

In any case, what counts as religious beliefs and what as kinship duties or as simply a means of preforming given tasks often overlap quite widely. What is described as supernatural entities may be transformed as we gain a fuller understanding of the factors involved.

10. Yet another proposition about the purpose of religion is presented by Carl Van Doren in “Why I Am an Unbeliever” (in Christopher Hitchens The Portable Atheist, 2007). He notes that "Each [god] was created by the imaginations and wishes of men who could not account for the behavior of the universe in any other satisfactory way"
The supposed necessity for humans to account for aspects of their surroundings was a recurrent feature of 19th and early 20th century anthropology. While such explanations may have been a concern for some practitioners they may have been of lesser concern to most members of human communities, who could operate quite satisfactorily without having full explanations of their world. Despite what many believe, humans seemingly do not require supernatural or indeed any explanation of why things are the way they are. Nor is there any inherent reason why beliefs in the supernatural be internally consistent. Consistency is usually not of great priority in most systems of supernatural beliefs.

Finally, we should consider the proposition that religion basically has no beneficial functions for most of its practitioners. This is still a heretical proposition in anthropology and raises the question of ‘if practices are not useful in some way why have religious beliefs been maintained by people almost everywhere in the most diverse contexts?’ Special prayers for the ill, masses for the dead, couvade practices while wives are nearing delivery, avoidance of having sex during religiously designated times, funeral practices which seem to almost bankrupt the provider and so forth. It may be that any general answer for the existence of religion will be incorrect. There may be a host of specific and different reasons behind spiritual practices and beliefs in different societies.

Just as human societies managed to survive when people knew next to nothing about how material aspects of the world operated and what the relevant factors were in common processes, so too they have managed to survive while maintaining mistaken and totally erroneous beliefs in spirits. In contrast to most anthropological accounts, religious beliefs and practices may often not be functional in any meaningful way -- they may convey no beneficial consequences for their practitioners. Their religious beliefs may involve long standing erroneous views and utterly mistaken understandings. They may have consequences for their practitioners which are in no way beneficial.

Some other alleged functions of religion

What 'necessary' functions does religion allegedly fulfill, assuming that such functions required fulfilling at all? In no order of importance they include the following:

1. Some religions are said to alleviate the fear of death and may promise some better life after death. Such emotional benefits are however countered by a belief in the existence of a hell, a place of perpetual torment where those who have broken some religious taboo are dispatched to. This may create fear greater than that of death itself.

2. Religions also sustain a moral order of what is and what isn't permissible for believers (and all those under their control) to do or believe. This supports certain actions which are claimed to be necessary for that society, it maintains a degree of order without the intervention of any state laws or directive agencies. A problem arises when such a moral order is detrimental or not acceptable to many living under its sway.
3. Some religions sustain a belief that all those who have done evil in this life will be punished in the following one. Religion may provide a feeling of greater equity for those who have witnessed little justice in this world. As the coda to that old Wobbly song goes, "Work and pray, Live on hay. You'll get pie in the sky when you die." This may be of importance to some believers and constrain their actions.

4. Some religions sustain the hope that all loved ones who have died or been separated from the believer will be regained in an afterlife. This entails no problem for those who believe it, as a promise it does not seem to have any real cost.

5. Some religions promise the hope that all the hunger, fear, pain, loneliness, sickness, the dehabilitation of age, and indeed all things which negatively affect the lives of human beings will no longer exist in an afterlife. This can be a pleasant dream and also seems to have no costs attached unless the religion involved requires substantial earthly payments to assure that such dreams are fulfilled.

6. Some religions provide an established infrastructure for carrying out certain societal tasks, let us say the direction and authority required in maintaining communal irrigation systems throughout the year. It is held that early temples and their priests in certain early systems of irrigated agriculture were the pre-state mechanisms involved in providing such direction and also in storing and returning peasant grain crops during times of need in ancient Mesopotamia. This proposition entails a view that sacred temples would be seen as the most trusted institutions to direct communal activity and to store surplus peasant crops.

7. Many religions in state organized societies support the established hierarchy of the society of which they are a part. Many of their fundamental teachings are directed to this end -- that people must obey their rulers. This is of course beneficial to the dominant sectors and some commentators hold that whatever strengthens the dominant class strengthens the society as a whole. This is what is claimed, especially in contexts containing competing, predatory societies.

8. All religions are said to provide some degree of 'social solidarity' which, allegedly, all societies require in order to exist. This function is suggested when certain religious practices appear to provide no beneficial consequences at all. The claim that something is necessary to sustain the 'social solidarity' of a group was once made so often that it became something of a joke. However some degree of solidarity between members of a group is important in daily life or at special occasions.
CHAPTER 4

Some Questions About God, Evil, the Soul and an Afterlife

The problem of suffering and evil

Dawkins notes that "... there is no inherent reason to propose a benign god, if one should exist." He might be "a nasty one -- such as the one who stalks every page of the Old Testament." (Dawkins, R. The God Delusion (2006: 106).) Alternately a religion could postulate both an evil and a good god with almost equal powers. There might also be a single god who just does not have the time or the knowledge to keep up with what individuals are doing. Or he might be one who finds pleasure in human suffering and puts humans to unperformable tests to watch them fail. Alternately he may simply be too uninterested to keep abreast of the minutiae of human needs, let alone intervening to save them from any disastrous consequences of their deeds. There could be as many gods with as many distinct capabilities and interests as humans can imagine -- as well as some with traits which believers hold to be unimaginable. No? Isn't that part of the argument about humans being unable to fathom the rationale of god's decisions?

Probably the simplest way of getting around the problem of omnipotent gods and human suffering or evil is that presented by polytheistic religions. A pantheon of gods and goddesses, whether ancient Greek or more recent Yoruba, all have particular powers and distinct interests. Sometimes they vigorously compete amongst themselves for certain ends. The doings of such gods are not necessarily benign nor always comprehensible to humans. They may not intrude into human affairs unless especially interested in some way or because they are strenuously petitioned to by their human partizans. Or they may do so for quite extraneous reasons. That seems like a far more reasonable belief than that of monotheistic religions with their allegedly omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and benign god who exists alongside human suffering.

There are some gods in polytheism whose behavior results mainly in human suffering -- Shankpala, the Yoruba god of smallpox for instance. Or a god might not be truly omniscient, there might be far more things to keep an eye on in the world than is possible for any single god to keep track of. Or he may be powerful but not truly omnipotent, there are simply too many things to control than any single god has power over.

In Christianity it is said that god has endowed humans with free will. This is a major rationale for evil in Christianity which seems to suggest that humans choose
evil and create suffering as a consequence of their ungodly desires and deeds. How this applies to the deaths of children, caused by disease organisms let us say, is beyond me. A priestly answer is that the will of god is unknowable -- although apparently knowable enough when the interests of the church are involved.

There could also be a god who is on the job only part of the time and isn't responsible for what happens while he's away off shift. This would require a universe in which the established physical forces would continue to operate unchanged while god was off duty; one wouldn't want to have the nuclear strong force switch off while god was away or asleep. With some thought one can suggest multiple reasons for the existence of a supreme god in conjunction with human suffering and evil. However, the Christian god is allegedly omniscient, omnipotent, and benign as well as ever present, everywhere, always. That really is impossible to square with the evil in the world. A possible answer may be that of Buddhism, which seems to hold that the world and our impressions of it are all illusory. It holds that adepts must free themselves of their worldly impressions in order to find true wisdom and peace (as long as others supply the food, clothing, and habitations for the religiously adept).

There are other theological problems which monotheistic religions have which Buddhism, Hinduism and most traditional religions don't have. Certain theological problems are multiplied if one holds there exists only a single supreme god who is an omniscient, omnipotent, etc. etc. and a benign entity. To wit, one Christian way to explain suffering and evil throughout human history is the action of the devil. Why is it that believers choose evil so often when the alleged consequence is eternal damnation? One answer which long prevailed in Christianity is that evil deeds are often due to the wiles of the devil, that fallen arch angel who challenges god and mankind. That the devil misleads sinners into doing what god has prohibited. For the Zoroastrians, that ancient Iranian religion which once bid to out-recruit Christianity, the good lord Mithra is only slightly more powerful than the god of darkness and evil whose power would only be overcome after endless eons of struggle. Christian fundamentalists, who allegedly subscribe to a monotheistic faith, basically hold that dualistic theology.

Another answer to the question of evil is that humans are born inherently evil. In Christianity that evil seems to stem from Adam and Eve discovering sex through eating the forbidden apple and being forever expelled from Paradise, along with all their descendants. This may be an analogy to the consequences of unrestrained reproduction where humans literally breed themselves out of the garden of Eden. It is a proposition which holds that the orders of rulers and gods must be obeyed exactlying without question or the most terrible consequences will follow.

In some Christian views one escapes from sin, if at all, only through profound moral exactitude and with utter servility toward the big boss in the sky who redeems sinners by his profound forgiveness. In none of the world religions is there any requirement that god seek the forgiveness of humans for all the evil and suffering he has allowed to persist.

The requirements of Christianity can be taken to ludicrous ends. For instance, through an order by one 17th century metropolitan (pope) of the Russian Orthodox
church, church members were required to trace a symbolic cross over their chest from top to bottom initially rather than from one side to another first, as had been the case previously. This ritual became a test of loyalty toward the Russian Orthodox church as constituted at the time. In opposition (for unknown underlying reasons) a large sect of Old Believers continued to cross themselves from side to side first. They suffered greatly because of their adhesion to the former practice. It sounds rather like the mortal differences which divided Swift's Big End versus Small End egg eaters, as described in his *Gulliver's Travels*. Religions are full of such kinds of sacred rituals.

It is of course true that there is and can be no universal agreement on what constitutes evil and goodness, justice and injustice. All the proffered 'universal human rights' now in vogue are quite relativistic. Moral standards flow from often changeable requirements established by given societies at particular times. Questions of good and evil are a completely different order of things than questions of factual truth, which can be judged to be correct or not, mistaken or valid. Such a decision can never be reached in questions of good and evil, morality and immorality, all of which depend upon the standards used. All the silly verbiage about 'learning and knowing right from wrong’ is simply childish malarkey. At best the standard is clearly derived from one moral viewpoint or another, but is never a question of true or false or universal.

Another answer to the apparent existence of evil in the world is that there is no true evil or good, that these are ever changing evaluations raised by human societies. Ultimately that is correct. Behavior is endlessly variable between and even within human societies. Simply note the changing nature of good and evil as set forth in modern states over the course of the past century. Or the imputation of good and evil which allegedly differentiates 'us' from 'them' during times of conflict. In some societies the destruction and extermination of enemy tribes may be viewed as highly desirable and honorable. This point is made time and again throughout the Old Testament. Or one may note the bestial crimes once carried out by Christian churches against heretics and alleged witches. Such acts were invariably supported by the existing authorities and their followers even if today we consider such deeds to be the foulest crime. Indeed there is probably no bestiality which some moral code and its adherents cannot find to be acceptable. Simply consider the reintroduction of torture carried out by American interrogators on certain prisoners of war. Not only are such acts legitimized but they were strenuously defended by a sitting American President. Indeed, police forces regularly use such methods to extract confessions from those they consider culpable of certain crimes.

In any case, following the will of god(s) in no way removes individuals from the pursuit of evil, they simply make god a partner for their crimes. This is quite clear in the actions of religious extremists. Following the alleged will of a god(s) does not produce more moral individuals if the morality attributed to a god itself is evil. Atheists certainly have not been free from committing evil in this world but they at least are fully responsible for their own acts and cannot hide behind the prompting of gods or spirits.
There is of course the possibility that while no god exists certain beliefs can revolve around more or less secular views which become 'holy' through the way they are treated. There could be something like churches, with pastor-guides and even with lessons in morality, all without recourse to any supernatural entities. It may be that Confucianism was somewhat like that, even though it involved a role for ancestral spirits and in its popular forms contained many anthropomorphic gods and goddesses. But mainly Confucianism appears to be like a detailed code of proper conduct -- one centering around relative age, sex, kin relationships and established wealth. However, as was recognized in early communist China, Confucianism could be and historically was a moral code justifying the exploitation of the bulk of the Chinese people. It reserved state power exclusively to the upper classes of that society, it opposed all things new or novel. Confucianism was an integral part of the conservatism which so often stifled Chinese society through its long history.

There may be some churches on the edge of Protestant Christianity which approach religion in a secular manner but they are rather atypical. The validity of a supernatural belief might potentially be amenable to rational debate but a 'secular religion' would not necessarily be any more benign than those which worship supernatural beings. The precepts honored could entail quite brutal ones. The current worship of Americanism, a ruthless nationalism based upon a contempt for almost everyone else in the world, including many working class Americans, could be such a secular religion.

In short, most world religions are based upon some set of moral principles which are endlessly malleable so that most acts can either be opposed or supported by the religious. Morality itself is almost endlessly variable and not meaningfully classifiable into good or evil. What is 'good' or 'evil' is endlessly variable and statements which claim that "an individual should know the differences between right and wrong" are fundamentally silly, and ignorant. Nevertheless, there is a range of moral beliefs which are broadly shared by many religions and social systems and these are what are usually referred to when discussing standards of 'right and wrong'.

The idiocy of prayer

Why is it that prayer is so wide spread and so central in many religions? Well, let’s see. Prayer allows every individual to raise his/her individual concerns, fears, and wishes into the realm of divine concerns. No religion could ever begin to address the vast range of specific fears and desires which humans hold but which they can raise in their prayers to their gods or other spiritual entities.

What is strange about prayer is that people persist in it even when there are no observable returns forthcoming. There are of course fathomless rationales for why prayers are not answered, as well as endless interpretations of what constitutes a prayer answered. However one would think that after a while people would give up filing their requests to nonexistent gods, who do not/can not reply. Do people feel that their requests and thanks are being catalogued somewhere and will at some time be answered? Maybe.
Even more strange is that people sometimes do believe that their prayers are answered when this cannot be so. Is it like those who are temporarily relieved of their medical symptoms by the laying on of hands by faith healers? Unless one believes in the operation of mind over matter such 'cures' cannot occur and are explainable only in cases where the 'sick' are basically beset by psychological and not physical illness. I strongly suspect that such spiritual cures are not effective over the longer run.

Do those who pray or pay others to pray for them feel that their appeal requires a steady mass of prayer to reach their god's ears? Is quantity more influential than quality in such cases? What is an individual's response when after years of prayers for the welfare of others, his own child or spouse let us say, is struck down by some disaster? Why do people continue to pray when there can be no beneficial consequences to prayers, other than feeling better themselves? If gods exist why do they answer prayers either not at all or in some convoluted manner? Why should prayer be required for god(s) to do the right thing anyway?

One all-inclusive reply is, again, that god's will and his purpose are unknowable but that he knows what is best for us. That is ultimately an unanswerable response yet one wonders if it really fulfills anyone's feelings about human suffering, so often borne by the innocent. Can this be squared with an omnipotent, omniscient and allegedly benign god? Apparently it can, at least for many.

Often prayer is not intended to change anything, it is merely a form of worship thanking a god for what one appreciates in one's life. As long as the one praying is in moderately good health and comparatively secure there can be a lot for them to be thankful about - although why their thanks should flow to some god is questionable. Prayer in which people expect some beneficial result to accrue is quite a strange belief for adults to hold. But billions of people on earth do believe in it. Possibly it is only a form of thanks to unknowable entities that conditions have not turned out to be as bad as they might have been.

Some appeals to god are remarkably childish. For instance they may involve members of a high school football team kneeling in prayer to ask god, in unison, to allow them to win their upcoming game. They may be led by their school coach in a total perversion of the educational system. And yet many people don't find that such a weasely, whiny, utterly self interested request from the supreme lord of heaven and earth to be demeaning. Such intervention of god into earthly affairs would place him on par with the most trivial doings of tribal medicine men. I suppose that it is a transformation of religious belief into a form of magic.

Death and Immortal Souls

All living things die sooner or later, from the 3,000 year old scrub pine of the American southwest to the day long life of certain micro organisms. Few religions (other than Buddhism) have ever claimed that any organism other than man have immortal souls. But having an immortal soul may be a dubious privilege. According to Christian doctrine only those holding a proper, very narrow, faith have a chance of reaching heaven -- a very small percent of humanity. One Protestant sect even calculated that one's chance for a place in heaven was to be one of the 600,000 souls
(or even a mere 144,000) to be saved, one hundredth of one percent of all people then living, not including all those who had lived in the past. Most or at least many Christian churches have enthusiastically forswn heaven to any but their own followers. There will surely be one hell of a sea of excluded souls hanging around after death if indeed souls are immortal.

An atheist of course holds that there are no such things as souls, nor heaven or hell nor any valid stipulations of how one attains one or the other. It is simply a widely held fantasy. True believers might answer that is just as well that many others will not attain heaven and that the overwhelming majority of humans are bound to wind up in hell or limbo if the accounts of past Christian story tellers are correct.

Death for an individual is the total annihilation of what a person is and has experienced, what one feels and thinks, and any sentiments or qualities which make us human or simply a living creature. For an individual death is the ending of the entire universe, certainly one's participation and knowledge of it. The dead do not feel any pain or grief or regret, pleasure, sense of failure or accomplishment or anything else. While one is living one retains feelings about what one has done and not done in a life but none of these processes continue after death. Death is the absence of everything and anything. No one can or has ever truly experienced death only a process of dying. There is a steady trickle of individuals who believe they have experienced death but were somehow brought to life again. They mention some remarkable concurrences of the process and what was experienced. Their experiences may entail certain mental and physiological response which are pan human. But of course they didn't die, otherwise they would not be able to describe any of their experiences.

Those who believe that they have immortal souls which will rise to the heavens to live with their lord after death naturally have other feelings about the ending of life. If religion wasn't usually such an oppressive system of belief one would say "Well believe what you like if it makes you feel better. Knowing the truth is often not a path to greater happiness." Of course religion involves much more than simply beliefs about an afterlife.

As far as I can determine Jesus only raised two people up from the dead during his career preaching and we are not told what they had experienced while dead or what happened to them later in life. There is also the case of Jesus rising from his tomb three days after his crucifixion and walking through Jerusalem communing with his followers for some forty days afterwards. But for a god returned to earth after death he had little to impart to his followers. One would have thought that a god who returned to life after having been killed would use that fact to spread his message to the skeptical. But Christ's return did not apparently change the disinterest in which he had been held by the great majority of Jews.

In some religious systems individuals die and return to life on earth repeatedly. This occurs as the reincarnation of some of the souls of the dead in Buddhism and also in Hinduism. In some millennial Christian accounts whole armies of angels and spirits are raised up to gain victory in critical battles but these apparently never were
humans. The deeds of the resurrected dead normally provide little promise for the continuance of personal identity after death.

The more one can get people to believe in a personal existence after death the more readily one can load believers with fear about punishment during an afterlife. Unacceptable beliefs or deeds which have remained hidden in everyday life will stand revealed to an omniscient and judicial god after death. If something is not punished in this life then it will be pursued in the afterlife. This view is an autocrat's dream.

I suppose that the obverse is also true, that after death hidden virtues and good deeds also stand revealed to an allseeing god, that those who were not rewarded for good works while alive will receive recognition after death. However it seems to me that the bulk of Christianity's concern with an afterlife revolves around the punishments to be inflicted there. The afterlife as a place for potential rewards and punishments constitutes a balance of debts paid after death. Those who have borne the travails and the sufferings of the world will be exalted above others who have regaled themselves with a good life at others expense while alive. Individuals may be/ have been taught to believe that there is some other-worldly compensation for a hard life in the present world, that there is a settling of accounts after death. But it seems to me that few people truly resign themselves to a life of oppression and want while they are still living. Regardless of heavenly promises which may have been offered.

Threats of future punishments in a fiery hell however do seem to have entered into human fears about an afterlife, fears which were partially relieved through payments for the remission of sins, for emoluments offered to a church. This was long a significant money earner for the Catholic church, but it is a strange omnipotent god whose judgements can be modified by payments of cash or lands in this world. It is strange that such churches did not worry about how this mixing of the sacred with money would lead to questioning over time.

Michael Onfray in his In Defense of Atheism (2007) presumes that all (or at least most) religion is founded on the fear of death and that this involves a 'death instinct' which allegedly is inherent in all humans. For an astute commentator it is a rather silly view, taken from the maunderies of Sigmund Freud. He held that fear of death is a fundamental driving force of religions. However an afterlife plays a comparatively small role in many traditional non-monotheistic religions.

Onfray also notes that the 'priests' in the three monotheistic religions have turned the promise of an afterlife into a veritable cult of death. So much of the business of living being treated as a preparation for some afterlife. Religious fulminations against sexuality, against the acquisition of human knowledge, against drinking, thinking and other activities which give humans pleasure are part of this death cult. Such a charge seems a somewhat overdrawn indictment against the three middle eastern religions until one listens to the fulminations of some of their preachers today. Their monotheism is often a fear mongering death cult.

Needless to say, the majority of those who believe in some sort of supernatural entity keeping watch over humans are perfectly normal, decent individuals. Many are helpful, broadly concerned with the evils of the world and willing to do something to alleviate them. No doubt many of them are individually more decent than some
atheists. But the comparable morality between the two kinds of views is not what is at issue. In any case, it is doubtful what morality flows from religious beliefs, despite what it claims.

Needless to say the correct view of the cosmos, the correct interpretation of the material and living universe around us is and must be based upon the dismissal of any supernatural beings. Religions are usually based upon some kind of demand for adherence to specific beliefs without any proof or evidence why one should do so.

**Morality, Immortality and the Soul**

What does a belief in a god have to do with the maintenance of any kind of morality? All religions support some kind of morality, propositions about what one is supposed to do and what not, or actions about which the religion is indifferent. There is no reason to presume that religions have a corner on proclaiming what is moral and what is not.

Most atheists maintain a morality not markedly different from that prevalent in the society they are part of.* Logically one could transmit most of the moral principles proposed by the 'Great Religions' by normal enculturation in ways which are in no way religious. Admittedly one might want to exclude the messages based on bloodlust and the abysmal ignorance found in holy books One would also want to excise the raving and hate mongering prophets, excise the tales of murderous kings and their henchmen, remove the arrant ethnic chauvinism in many of the accounts. But one could extract a set of morals without reference to any god or goddess. However for most religions it would probably be a wasted effort to try to extract a systematic moral code from the mountain of contradiction which their holy books entail.

All three of the monotheistic religions believe in some sort of afterlife to which the souls of humans pass after death, whether to heaven, hell, purgatory or limbo. For indeterminate periods or for eternity. But what is this thing called a soul, is it material, immaterial, ever lasting or what? Can it think, experience or decide anything? It was once held that the soul was an indestructible immaterial essence which was created uniquely for each individual and accompanied him through life and death. It allegedly represents a person's essence. In some cultures individuals have multiple souls which have their own tasks and go their own way both during and after life. Well, why not? It may seem schizophrenic but if souls are immaterial essences not ruled by the laws of nature they can be anything which man can imagine.

Judeo-Christian-Islamic believers have only one soul per person which is literally indestructible. Presumably it can be changed to some extent through the right or wrong education and decisions made throughout life. In some supernatural belief systems the longevity of souls is somewhat indeterminate, they are not eternal but tend to dissipate over years and generations existing roughly to the extent in which the living remember them. But in the monotheistic world religions souls are eternally immortal. If that is meant literally then it is inconceivable. What is literally 'eternal'?
When did creatures in the Hominid line first develop souls? Are there Australopithecine or Homo erectus souls in heaven? Probably not. What of all those many billions of souls which appeared before any of the salvationist religions were established? Will human souls still exist after all life on earth is incinerated by an expanding sun or after the stars have shrunk to being cool cinders? The thing is that most of the traditional religious beliefs were established when humans knew next to nothing about the world they were living in, had no idea of the time scales of life and of the universe. These belief systems are the constructs of comparatively primitive societies in which the world was believed to be only a few thousand years old.

It requires truly extraordinary faith to believe that the thoughts and personalities of individuals can survive death, survive the physical destruction of the human body and brain. Whatever the 'mind' is it cannot and does not exist without an intact, functioning brain. (I cannot imagine how.) And even in a functioning brain what is the 'soul' -- some generalized construct of an individual's knowledge and personality or what? I would suggest that the 'soul' is no more than a form of reference to certain guessed at qualities of an individual, a summation of an individual's thoughts and feelings. When the brain dies or no longer functions then the 'soul' disappears with that lost functioning of the brain. Simple, concise and final.

If there is such a thing as a soul where does it go after death? Does it rise to god for judgement and disposition? No, it doesn't go anywhere. The soul is simply a loose way of referring to certain personal qualities of a human mind -- nothing more, nothing less.

Most people reasonably fear death, the termination of all experiences, all desires, all awareness and influence. Some individuals are seemingly fearless in youth, possibly because of a feeling of invulnerability, others are so in old age when a weariness with life has developed. But the promise of a personal afterlife has probably been the single biggest selling point of the three monotheisms. Shouldn't one take their promise seriously even as only a precaution? No, not if it means supporting views which are utterly wrong headed and participating in social institutions which are oppressive and against everything one believes in. A rejection of religiosity would require taking a heroic stance if it were not for the irrefutable fact that there are no gods, no holy commandments, no human souls and no afterlife in either heaven or hell. Thank god for that!

What is the supernatural and the sacred? What exactly is an afterlife, heaven and hell, holy proscriptions and rituals? What indeed is holy? All the terms used here have many different usages -- some so narrow as to exclude many usages while others so wide ranging and all inclusive as to be virtually meaningless. As with all other blocks of human behavior and belief there are no boundaries inherent in religious terms themselves. The meaning and the application of these terms are imposed by the user and his culture, the phenomena do not come with labels attached.

In regards to some of the terms used here: supernatural entities are those which are held to be other than natural forces and conditions and not explainable by natural processes. However for most of the history of humanity there was no natural explanations for most living and non living processes. Therefore the domain of the
supernatural was far wider than it is today when so much more is materially understood. Pushing back supernatural explanations witnessed great strides forward during the past two to three centuries. Until today when the molecular processes which constitute life are being investigated and becoming gradually understood.

One might suppose that scientific advances have greatly limited the scope for supernatural explanations but that apparently is not so. More than 60% of Canadians still believe in the existence of and commandments given by some supernatural entity, as do some 80% of Americans. All political leaders in America and Canada usually have to belong to some Christian church to have the possibility of electoral success. Presumably their adherence to some formal religious organization is a claim to some sort of moral trustworthiness, a claim which one would expect to be historically very questionable.

The term supernatural is an evaluation of some phenomenon, usually by a believer in supernatural entities, as to its material inexplicability. However the underlying nature of a great many phenomena are misunderstood or unknown to much of the general public. Furthermore what is a supernatural puzzle for some often requires only a comparatively simple material explanation for others. Even those processes which are at present inexplicable may in the future be found to be either illusory or explainable by new insights. Such was the case with the insights offered by evolution through natural selection over a century ago. The present day supernatural is only the mistaken or the currently unexplained. It is a much more narrow set of things than is often supposed.

‘Sacred’ is a particularly variable term which refers to some deified feature of certain phenomena. Whatever it is is infused with some supernatural meaning or quality -- it is to be demarcated from the profane or the everyday. The sacred is typically symbolic of some more extensive body of beliefs, it is normally beyond debate or questioning be it holy text, divine messages, holy prophets, holy words and names etc. The quality of sacredness can be attached to almost anything if that thing in some way symbolizes important beliefs of a given religion.

Sacred sentiments can flow over a congregation of believers and fill them with heightened belief and dedication or it can act as an allegedly deadly force reaching out to punish some unbeliever or sinner. As of yet we have not heard of items such as beer or hamburgers described as sacred -- the term is normally reserved for what is held to be the finer, higher, human emotions. Sacredness is a quality which adheres to an object or act although it is not that object or act itself.

Holy is a similar quality which inheres in some acts, locales and persons. The *Webster New Collegiate Dictionary* defines ‘holy’ as "set aside for the service of God or gods". In short it refers to any person or any act which is performed with the intention of providing praise or service to some god, it might be the holy mass murder of 20,000 war prisoners to honor the Aztec gods, it might be spilling a small cup of rice wine to a Japanese household god. The requirements of assorted gods are quite variable as are their fulfillment.

Christian and Jewish holy writ has at times been extremely murderous and yet still holy, actions flowing from the instructions given by a god to his followers. Holy acts
and beliefs are not necessarily peaceful and benign. According to the religious tradition involved both things and persons can become holy, they then become separated by this quality from those around them, they attain a state of sacredness. Wine when it is blessed by an ordained priest can become transformed into the blood of a god executed some 2,000 years ago -- an example of how the ordinary can be converted into the holy.

Faith is the ability to be sure of certain claims when there is no evidence for them at all, or indeed when there is substantial evidence against their existence. Individuals with strong enough faith can fail to see or overlook anything which does not accord with their own established beliefs. Religious faith entails belief in some entities and processes for which there is no evidence whatsoever. Those who tell others that they must have faith in the existence of a benevolent god are really demanding that their listeners accept something for which there is no evidence at all. Alternately it is an appeal for others to believe in what they cannot know except through wishful expectations or the authority of others.

Since religious belief is not linked to anything material it inherently requires little effort or resources to maintain. Sacred requirements can be highly variable but differences between religions are not quite as variable as one might expect for sets of mental phenomena. Religion in societies above the tribal level tend to be highly organized and can be a major factor in the political operations of the state, even in relatively primitive ones.

Whereas many organized religions set out to impose uniformity in the beliefs of their members, they achieve this only to a certain degree. All religions contain disparate and often conflicting beliefs within their fold and they normally develop internal sects over time. When theological differences grow beyond a certain point sects depart from unified control. They typically come to constitute a new form of the religion or a heterodox version of the original. This is the stuff of church history.

Some world religions have been around for 2,500 or more years with an alleged chain of continuity to their founding roots. These two and a half thousand year old roots continue to sprout new sects regularly to bedevil mankind with their fantasies.

It is when we leave the state level 'great' religions and move to those of non state societies that religious beliefs really become variable. No one ever has and no one ever will tabulate all the varieties of religious beliefs which exist in the world. Such religious beliefs can be quite matter of fact, they may entail, for instance, sacred aspects of cultivating a bush garden or arranging for the slaughter and distribution of some cattle. The daily lives of tribal people may be suffused with religion and supernatural beliefs but these are often dealt with in a rather matter of fact manner, almost profanely.

Conceptions about the existence of human souls and an afterlife are fairly widespread but are by no means universal. Typically souls are an image of the living person with an after death trajectory normally lasting as long as the living remember the person. Some may become ghosts, sometimes helpful to but often hostile toward the living. The afterlife envisioned by many believers is normally comparable to that which the person experienced while alive. The three western world religions have a
deep dichotomy between those bound for heaven and those headed for hell. Souls, if they are thought of as being an image of the once living person, are not usually transformed into other creatures after death. Heaven and hell, if they exist in a given religion, are populated by entities rather like the ones they were when alive on earth. What has always puzzled me is how the religions deal with the problem of the utter, all consuming boredom which one might think would emerge after souls are in heaven endlessly praising their god. No hunger, no lust, no work or study -- just the mental high of having been saved for eternity. Either the saved soul must operate in some quasi drug induced state of permanent elation, effectively brain dead, or it must sooner or later come to wish for total annihilation. That is what souls bound to eternal torment in various hells must also come to wish for.

Needless to say the majority of those who believe in the existence of some sort of supernatural entity keeping watch over humans are or can be perfectly decent individuals. Warm, helpful, broadly concerned with the evils of the world and willing to do something to alleviate them No doubt many of them are individually more decent than some atheists. The morality between the two kinds of view is not what is at issue.

If being an atheist does not involve commitment to any higher morality then what are its claims to anyone’s allegiance? Firstly, atheism is simply the correct view of the existing world. Correct interpretations of the material and living universe around us must be based upon the dismissal of the deeds and commands of any supernatural beings. Secondly, all organized religions are ultimately based upon some kind of authoritarian demand for the acceptance of its claims, without any proof of a validating authority. This acceptance probably stems from irrational lessons absorbed early in life. As we see around us today such demands can and often do lead to a wide range of repressive actions by states and other powerful organizations. For most of their history the three great world religions have been fundamentally opposed to expanding human knowledge and scientific undertakings. Today the American fundamentalists have taken the lead in religious know-nothingism. A total rejection of religion would require taking a heroic stance if it were not for the fact that there are no gods, no holy commandments, no human souls and no afterlife in either heaven or hell.

**On Miracles**

Miracles are events which go against every expectation of natural laws. Normally they must be rarely occurring events -- if the miracle occurs too often in conjunction with certain processes it will probably be seen as a not yet understood facet of some natural phenomena. As scientific understandings of nature deepen many of the events which had once been viewed as miracles are converted into illusions or newly understood aspects of reality. There is also a usage of 'miracle' which merely means an unexpected beneficial consequence. The proper way to deal with 'true miracles', if they really are not understandable through the current state of knowledge, is to treat them as being the result of as yet unknown processes not as inherently inexplicable ones.
Throughout the nineteenth and into the earlier twentieth writers commenting on impossible or very highly improbable accounts in the Bible often attempted to translate these tales into something just barely possible. An example might be a claim that the trumpeters who marched around Jericho blowing their horns to bring down the city's walls were successful because their trumpets created sympathetic vibrations which split the bonds between the wall's stones. Such reinterpretations of biblical stories rarely attempted to verify the possibility of their claims. Moreover there was never any mention of what the god-directed victors did to the vanquished -- enslaved or totally exterminated them.

More contemporary interpretations of such stories tend to leave the religious accounts as they originally appeared, possibly treating them as a representation of what was once believed possible. Or they may be presented as an ‘alternate truth’, where fables and facts, goblins and gearboxes are equally valid. There is however a more proper response in dealing with many of the biblical accounts. That is to dismiss them all as social hallucinations or as utterly fabricated tales, poorly constructed lies intended for listeners who have little competence in determining what was possible and what was not. (With God everything is possible -- especially rampant lying to the gullible.) Such dismissal is the preferred solution for accounts of miracles mentioned here.

There must have always been those who disbelieved in the existence of miracles and heavenly acts. An old Ukrainian camp worker once said to me, long ago, in reference to religious beliefs in his native village on the western boundaries of the Russian Empire:

"There were more miracles in Poland than bathtubs. You couldn't dump a load of cow shit from the barn without looking first to see if not a miracle happened on that spot at some time. A cross that cried, a fire that wouldn't burn up some saint, a place where a couple kids a few hundred years before said they saw Christ's old lady."

Compared to the belief which many still extend to biblical tales this response is immensely refreshing.

If some happening, some phenomenon or human response seems totally unbelievable then it probably did not actually happen. Accounts based upon such tales are either calculated lies or a fantasy based on the gullibility of those conveying them. They should not be endlessly pondered over but simply be dismissed. Those who believe the nonsense presented will obviously believe anything they are told if it is presented as sacred or holy in some way. Arguing with believers about biblical tall tales is pointless, factual debate simply does not register with them.

So many accounts stemming from the early period of Christian dominance in Europe are both utterly unreliable and childish. Miracles occur constantly in such tales and it is a god-forsaken place which does not have at least a few holy miracles. There were more miracles floating around Christian Europe than you could shake a stick at.
Miracles may simply be events that are somewhat less tragic than the most terrible conceivable. For example when 12 out of 38 children involved in a bus accident survive rather than perish their survival may be claimed to be a miracle. Not for the 26 who did die of course. Miracles, when they allegedly happen and are not simply the fabrications of reporters, normally revolve around some beneficial outcome for some individuals. Neither the participants nor the reporter need understand what is involved. The fact that a certain percentage of a population survives an epidemic of the bubonic plague may be seen as miraculous by some observers, who haven't the vaguest idea of the causes of the disease or the bases of survival. Claiming miraculous cures are a typical response in backward societies.

Throughout most of history humans have had only the most limited, often mistaken, understanding of the forces and agents active in the world around them. Rather than admitting that they did not understand such forces humans often invented supernatural processes, of which miracles are one class. As human understanding of biological and physical processes have deepened supernatural miracles have gradually withered away. However televangelist preachers can still reap a rich harvest by peddling holy well water from a sacred springs. As the old saying goes, "Against stupidity even the gods struggle in vain."

In the Catholic church, during most of its history, miracles were quite common. Many churches or parishes worth their salt had at least one local miracle to sustain them; crosses and religious statues that cried, places where the righteous had been protected from the wiles of the devil through heavenly intervention or other places where the preferences of the almighty were revealed to certain believers. Miracles range from the most obscure to those of national scale -- like the miracle of Fatimah.

In the backlands of Portugal, in 1917, a heavenly apparition informed some children that a message was soon to be delivered from god at that spot. They told their local priest and the church immediately bruited the expected visit about among the faithful. This story allegedly brought some 70,000 (who was counting) of the pious to receive the message from on high. On the stated day it was claimed that the sun fell out of the heavens and approached earth -- some witnesses claimed to have seen this clearly. One version of the heavenly message proclaimed that the faithful must ready themselves to meet the coming of the anti-Christ. Allegedly this crowd witnessed the sun fall and heard the message. The local priests involved were soon planning a new pilgrimage site there.

Possibly it was a case of mass hysteria but more likely it was a tale created and disseminated by fantasy prone clerics and spread by constant repetition to others. No one asked for a sample of the alleged witnesses' experiences, of what they had seen and heard. Possibly after the pilgrims had returned home and themselves heard of what allegedly had been witnessed many of them may have 'remembered' just that. You can watch comparable miracles performed on national television by evangelist faith healers regularly. There are streams of the halt and lame made able to walk and the blind who recovered their sight by the laying on of sanctified hands, and possibly a sprinkle of sacred well water. On religious television miracles experienced by the born-again are a dime a dozen.
For eighteen hundred years the Christian world was awash with miracles ranging from the totally impossible to the merely unbelievable. As author Jean O'Grady Weaver's uncle said to her:

"People will believe anything if it's presented in the right way, the more preposterous the better. Whales speak Esperanto at the bottom of the sea. Yaqui shamans and their protégés flit over Baja California by astral projection. And on the banks of the muddy Fraser River there once stood a great wooden metropolis before the age of Troy. All those propositions can be sold. They're even less harmful than most things people believe." (J. O"Grady Weaver, ed., No Redeeming Qualities, 2000, Introduction)

The 'miracle of Fatimah' was rapidly accepted by the Catholic church and the place almost immediately became an international pilgrimage site, with the attendant construction of shrines, hosteries and the sale of blessed medals and relics. It created a local economic boom so there were no objections there. The alleged miracle was soon converted into a warning about the establishment of satanic communism in Russia. Portugal itself was soon to be turned into a church/fascist dominated state ruled by one President Salazar for almost fifty years. At the end of which the miracle of Fatimah had degenerated into being a rather tawdry Madonna of Kitsch.

**Why Do People Continue to Believe in Supernatural Entities?**

I must confess that I do not have a real answer to the above question. Neither the answers given by anthropology nor those presented in other commentary permits one to answer it. None of the proffered answers seem to be adequate. It might be that religion provides some supernatural security in a world which is anything but secure. It might also be one's belief in an all powerful entity and the particular demands and returns he offers to his followers validates one’s belief. A belief in a certain kind of religion may promise that one's limited life on earth is not the only life one has. Religion promises immortality for at least some humans. What is certain is that Judeo-Christian-Islamic conceptions of the supernatural are not universal, they find little support in many cultures.

Many religious belief systems have no single supreme god, the supernatural forces in play may operate quite differently than we might expect. Often gods or goddesses or other supernatural beings are not all powerful and they are hardly ever all-knowing. They are often quite changeable in their interests and they are not necessarily benign. There are typically good and evil spirits at work in the world according to many polytheistic religions. If there is a belief in an afterlife those bound for it and their existence there are quite variable. It seems that classic Greek religions had neither a heaven nor a hell for their believers but rather saw souls of the dead deteriorating gradually in the underworld where all went after death. The souls of the dead led an extraordinarily boring existence and over time gradually faded out of existence. Christianity and the other offshoot from Judaism do not have patent rights
to heaven and hell or in an after life but in few religion does it play as central a role as in Christianity.

In many cases loyalty to a particular religion is an allegiance to the society or community one is part of. People do not necessarily know the specific claims of their church's theology nor can they normally provide a systematic rationale for the religious beliefs that they have. People may have been taught religious lessons as children by their parents, often by their teachers and by the society of which they are a part. However others from the same backgrounds learn to reject many of the beliefs of their childhood.

**Why the difference?**

Belief in sacred entities and related dogmas may simply be a by-product of a period of human history. The supernatural entities and the rules they set for humans may simply be an extension of the demands of established regimes. Organized religion may primarily be a system of control over peoples' minds. At various times in the not so distant past priests and ministers, rabbis and imams would have spoken quite openly about this concomitant of religion. Indeed, in the present as in the past some religious specialists view their task to see to it that both believers and nonbelievers adhere, at least publicly, to religious doctrine. It may be that the social pressures mobilized in small towns against anyone who appears excessively nonconformist is comparable to the powers mobilized by religion. For many the only feasible response to such pressures is to seemingly agree on the surface while hiding one's true beliefs.

Threats of a godly judge eternally torturing individuals for 'sins' in this world is apparently an effective threat to hang over people. He allegedly is the all-seeing, all-recording eye in the sky which keeps track of behavior and thoughts which can be hidden from earthly authorities. That kind of a god is the policeman and jailer's dream.

Specific religious allegiances may be part of being a member of a particular community -- religious views are sustained and reinforced through group membership. The non acceptance of particular religious beliefs may be viewed as a betrayal of the community the person is a part of. Naturally there will be some who disbelieve the given dogma but divergent views are not bandied about openly. In the case of Christianity, Judaism and Islam, religious specialists determine what can and what cannot be believed. They have various means at their disposal to enforce their edicts ranging from public disapproval, to expulsion to capital punishment for blatant unbelief. Certain individuals and certain kinds of societies are given to periodic heresy hunting and punishing their targets for holding views unacceptable to them. This is one good reason for loathing religion and those who would impose it on others. The enforcement of religious doctrines can result in some individuals coming to distrust and reject the entire religious superstructure as well as those who would enforce it.

According to some religions if you believe in and do the right things, dismiss any qualms about the relevant sacred figures, perform the proper rituals etc. you can buy
yourself a passage to heaven. This may relieve one of fears of ending up in hell, which the same religion has invented. It sounds like an extortion scam in the guise of religious belief and as with other successful scams there are many people who believe the promises made and are ready to pay for them. There should be no wonder why the recipients of churchly stipends and lucrative money making schemes support such activities.

In a world of insecurity, misfortune, disease, malnutrition and early death the monotheisms offered an after-worldly chance for restitution of losses borne in an earthly existence. This promise holds considerable appeal for many but one wonders how it can involve the same god who created a world filled with suffering and injustice. One answer is that the material world in which the believer lives is merely a testing ground for an individual's faith, that the rewards (and the punishment) come afterward. Many people actually believed that but there must always have been others who didn't, those who felt that this was the only world there was. Throughout the reign of politically powerful religions it would have been extremely unwise to admit to such a disbelief.

Another answer is that all the evil and injustices existent in the world and in peoples' lives are due to their not following god's instructions carefully enough. Alternately, the misfortunes and suffering of believers were explainable through the wiles of an evil god, the devil, whose stratagems are almost impossible to overcome except through the most rigorous belief in salvation through some holy savior. This may be a way of rationalizing times when bad things happen to good people but it hardly seems like a comfort to those affected by evil consequences. Indeed it requires a rather self-concerned individual to believe that innocent children are doomed by their alleged creator to eternal suffering if they do not submit to the rituals of a particular church.

As regards doubts about religious claims it should be noted that many people can maintain the most contradictory views without the least difficulty. In fact believing contradictory nonsense can be a test of faith -- one which many pass with flying colors. Human brains are apparently not overly disturbed by holding various contradictory views simultaneously. Moreover there are often alternate interpretations of sacred precepts available in any religion and these can normally support much of whatever one in fact does.

Christianity holds that one Jesus of Nazareth was the son of god but is also a part of that same god. He was born of a virgin by immaculate conception. (Nothing so novel in that, thousands of girls become pregnant every year despite being alleged virgins.) Jesus moved through Palestine during the last years of his life performing assorted miracles while disseminating his religious messages. But he left not a single documented trace of himself behind. Nothing outside the claims of later apostles who generally did not know him personally. He preached various vaguely benign homilies, sometimes at odds with the views of Jewish Orthodoxy and was seized and executed on a cross by the Roman occupiers at the behest of those same Jewish notables. However after some days in his tomb he was resurrected for some forty further days before returning to heaven to join his father. All this contains enough
contradictions to make your head spin but none of this troubles believers. Gods are mysterious beings and act in mysterious ways which are ultimately beyond human understanding.

Other religions contain comparable 'mysteries' and internal contradictions. Richard Dawkins suggests that involving a god anywhere in an explanation of why something exists always gives a faulty answer. It entails answering a question with a statement of fundamental ignorance since there is never any meaningful account of how an immaterial entity carries out his/its alleged tasks. Rather than recognizing our current ignorance about a certain topic people simply label their ignorance 'God' and that is supposed to be an answer.

"Why is God considered an explanation for anything? It's not -- it's a failure to explain, a shrug of the shoulders, an 'I dunno' dressed up in spirituality and ritual. If someone credits something to God, generally what it means is that they haven't a clue so they're attributing it to an unreachable, unknowable sky-fairy." (Dawkins, Richard, 2006: 134)

So why is it that people believe in gods? Religious belief systems which have little idea of how anything works or came into being could offer pseudo answers for everything called 'god' or 'god's will'. Those who did not know the causes of and could offer no treatment for the most common of diseases could fill places of worship with people come to hear accounts of the wonders worked by god and the minutia of his rules for human behavior. You don't have to go back to Byzantine clerics to observe this, you can watch it everyday on television.

Belief in god(s) really is a puzzle. One which no one has ever believably answered, at least not to my satisfaction. A belief in god partly involves some misfunctioning psychological process. It is sometimes 'answered' by a claim that a belief in god is a means of making the world understandable in relatively primitive societies which have no better ways of understanding why things are the way they are. 'God' is certainly a much easier way of answering complex questions about material processes and requires little or no knowledge of their true explanation. This is probably a key consideration in many people's belief in god -- that it/he answers all questions they have no answer for. The main flaw is that religion does not in fact answer any real question whatsoever. In Christianity belief in its particular saviour-god promises eternal life after death for those believers who are 'saved'. It and its related belief systems are the only ones which offer an opportunity to triumph over death, that ever-present and always victorious enemy of humanity. Still, none of this seems sufficient to account for belief in the mass of religious fantasies and prohibitions which have arisen in Christianity, Islam and Judaism.
CHAPTER 5

The Tribal God of the Old Testament

Is the bible the Holy word of god? If so he must be an extremely ignorant, bloodthirsty and provincial god. In the Old Testament he is portrayed as the tribal god of a bunch of illiterate sheep and goat herders who were so culturally backward that they hadn't yet discovered the manner in which water vapor rises into the skies and later falls as rain. They thought that rain came from a bottomless basin located in the clouds somewhere from which it falls, sometimes at the behest of god and sometimes due to human prayer and sacrifices. If rain didn't fall after the usual rituals then there was some hidden, usually sinful, reason why it was withheld.

The Old Testament of the bible is a text which conceives of no real humans existing far beyond the banks of the Nile and those of the Euphrates. The New Testament extends that world to the eastern and the north-eastern edges of the Mediterranean. As for the remaining 97+ percent of the world, the bible does not even know that it exists. This is a poor prognosis for a text which is supposed to guide us in our current lives and decisions.

The invading desert tribesmen of the Old Testament originally knew nothing better to do with cities than to burn them to the ground and to enslave or exterminate every living being in them. Young and old, men and women, rich or impoverished. The Old Testament is a text which sanctifies mass murder and genocide which flows from godly commands. It deals with a group of desert nomads living on the edge of early civilizations, an aggressively militarist and bloodthirsty people whose heads were knocked together from time to time by neighboring empires when they created too much trouble. Egyptian, later Babylonian and then Assyrian, finally Greek and Roman forces conquered and ruled over Palestine throughout the course of early Jewish history. That Jewish religious beliefs would have survived and become incorporated into the cultures of hundreds of millions of people in the world is probably the only real mystery of this middle-eastern death cult.

If the bible is the word of god, straight from the horse's mouth so to speak, then it is the voice of an ignorant tenth century BC god. It is not surprising that a god created by Jews holds Jews as his specially chosen people and that he disregards the rights and lives of all others in the world. What word did he have for the travails of Egyptian peasants and serfs of the time? None other than increased suffering and death because their Pharaoh (over whom they had no authority) did not grant Jewish
demands quickly enough. For a god who created the entire cosmos as well as the earth and all on it he is remarkably provincial and bloodthirsty.

People can be amazingly gullible when it comes to religion; otherwise intelligent individuals can behave like not too bright children. This applies to ordinary believers in ordinary churches or synagogues to say nothing about members of the various extremist religious groups that exist. What accounts for the gullibility of so many people when it comes to religion?

The God of the Old Testament

There's a tale near the beginning of the Old Testament about the mythical founder of the Jewish people, one Abraham. Sometime around 1921 BC (imaginary time) a man who had emigrated from the somewhere in Chaldea, now southwestern Iraq, into the land of Canaan. After some years there he received a warning from god to leave his new land because of a coming famine. This is one of the earliest accounts of the Jewish god Yahweh that we hear of in the old testament. This god tells Abraham that he is the supreme god of the Jews and promises Abraham all the lands of Canaan for his descendants in the indeterminate future.

In any case Abraham gathers up his wife Sarah, some of his flocks and belongings and sets out for Egypt to ride out the famine. His wife however is extraordinarily beautiful and he worries that if they travel as man and wife some of their fellow travelers will kill him and steal his wife. So she travels with him as his sister. For some unexplained reason she and he are safer that way. However shortly after they arrive in Egypt she is spotted by the reigning Pharaoh who, naturally, wishes to add Sarah to his collection of wives and bed mates. Abraham does not demure and maintains the story that she is his sister. Sarah goes off to the Pharaoh's bed chamber and is presumably royally screwed for an indeterminate period. Abraham grows wealthy on the trade advantages provided by being a 'brother-in-law' to the Pharaoh. He becomes the owner of many cattle and gold and silver so this arrangement must have gone on for a fairly long period. He couldn't have been an early pimp by any chance, could he?

However this arrangement greatly irked the god Yahweh and he sent plagues upon the people of Egypt -- he was a Jewish god and he punished innocent people for what Jews did it seems. After a while the Pharaoh discovered that Sarah had been Abraham's wife and not his sister; he grew angry at the deception and had Abraham and their common wife expelled from the country. A rather mild response all considered. Good riddance. Abraham lived comfortably on his earnings for many years thereafter. (Genesis, 12)

By the way, this Abraham is considered as the 'father of the Jewish people'. Here is what the former revivalist preacher Charles Templeton in Farewell to God (1996) has this to say about the affair.

"Pharaoh, enchanted by Sarai, takes her into into his court and demonstrates his appreciation by turning business opportunities Abram's way. There could be few acts of duplicity more reprehensible. Abram
misrepresented himself and his wife as a procurer for the Pharaoh, requires his wife to perjure herself and become a court prostitute, and benefits financially through the transaction.

After which Yahweh made a covenant with Abram in which he promised him a son and his people the land of Canaan, this despite the fact that Canaan had been settled and occupied for centuries by others." (1996: 62)

There is another story about a man called Lot, a nephew of Abraham, who was visited by two angels who tell him that they were going to destroy his city of Sodom and Gomorrah because of the evil of its inhabitants -- imputations of homosexuality and promiscuous sex are alluded to. Everyone must be exterminated of course. While they were explaining this to Lot a crowd of local men appeared demanding that they be given the two visitors for sexual purposes. Lot tries to fob them off by offering them his two virgin daughters (who would have been gang raped) but the angels intervene and blind the entire crowd. They then tell Lot to immediately take his wife, children, servant-slaves and all his other livestock and depart because they were about to destroy the entire town. As they leave the town Lot's wife turns back to look at it one last time but is turned in to a pillar of salt. No half way measures for these holy angels.

So far so good. Everyone else in town is killed, men, women, children, servants and slaves. "That'll larn'm not ta go sodomizing inna 'oly land."

After much wandering around Lot and his two daughters set up camp in a desert cave and Lot gets drunk. His two daughters are getting rather horny after not having husbands or sex for so long, so they scheme to get their father so drunk that he will not recognize them when they climb into bed with him. First the older daughter goes in and he has sex with her while the next night the younger daughter goes in and she has it off with Lot. The story does not say how long this goes on but one night a piece seems hardly enough for them both to get pregnant. As the old saying goes,' The family that lays together stays together". After a while they both realize they are pregnant and go on to beget a stream of descendents which will become a branch of the Jewish lineage. Apparently god doesn't strike them dead for incest and they all live happily ever after (see Genesis 19). Well, at least as happily as a bunch of benighted, god-crazed barbarians can be.

When I first heard this story I suspected it was a bit of forged debauchery smuggled into the bible for some hostile purpose, but it is really and truly in the text of the old testament. Feminists sniffing out familial incest take note, although this matter was the result of the daughters' decision.

Apparently there were still many Jews left living in Egypt after Abraham departed from that country. At a later point they began to feel insecure with the expulsion of their Hyksos military overlords and decide to leave Egypt en mass. A sizeable minority do not want to leave but are swept along by the exodus. Moses, either a senior official to the Pharaoh or pharaoh's servant, is the mythical leader of this probably mythical emigration.
After leaving Egypt the Jews (not yet Israelites) wander around the Sinai desert for forty years, which could never have been sustained in that environment without an adequate supply of water and copious amounts of manna. During their stay there Moses climbs up to the top of Mount Sinai to be interviewed and instructed by god on what his chosen people must do from here on in. Moses is given two stone tablets on which ten commandments are written. This sounds reminiscent of the Mormon story of gold tablets which the angel Moroni showed to Joseph Smith, an illiterate con man in the backwaters of upstate New York in the early 19th century. These Smith translated into English with the help of one of his new Mormon converts.

In any case, during Moses brief absence many of the Jewish emigrants, waiting at the bottom of Mount Sinai, decide to cast a golden calf from the ornaments they carried with them and worship it. This breaks the first of god's commandments, that Jews must worship him alone, which Moses hasn't yet delivered to them. On returning he goes crazy mad when he sees his people worshipping an idol again. Some may feel that herdsmen worshipping a golden calf is more appropriate than them worshipping a perpetually angry and murderous storm god. However Moses orders them to break up the idol and grind it into dust and then he commands the Levite tribe amongst them to take their swords and kill as many of the backsliding Jews as they can. They kill about 3,000 Jews and nobody ever tries to cast a golden calf ever again. Those writing this bible do not find these the actions of a mad, blood thirsty tyrant. Instead he is the Jews' most honored leader, prophet and law giver.

After assorted interviews with god (without any witnesses of course) Moses begins sending his impossibly large armies against the Canaanites and related people already dwelling in Palestine, a land which god has given the Jews -- according to the Jews. They carry out genocidal massacres against the peaceful farming communities of Palestine in earnest (see Exodus 32). The biblical accounts are detailed in the accounts of Jewish armies exterminating all living beings in the towns they overrun.

The dating is somewhat doubtful because at the time these campaigns were allegedly occurring Egypt had military garrisons in Palestine. But nowhere in their recorded accounts is there any mention of Jewish invasions and mass murder. The Egyptian forces would have quickly put a stop to this if it had occurred since they did not follow the commands of a Jewish storm god.

As for the following books of the bible, Joshua and Deuteronomy are filled with descriptions of the mass murder of seven or more peoples in Palestine, all put to the sword, their towns destroyed and any survivors executed or enslaved. In fact Yahweh reproves his host for leaving any people alive. At one point a Jewish war chief executes all the surviving males in a town, from infants to old men, and also all women who are not virgins. The nubile virgins of the exterminated people are allowed to live to serve as bed mates for the conquering Jewish soldiers. This doesn't satisfy Yahweh who demands that they all be killed and they soon are.

All this may be Jewish myth mongering, they may have moved into Palestine more peacefully. But it is their holy account of their first major prophet whom all should hold in their hearts. It is their account of how they became the indigenous people of Palestine -- through god directed genocide.
Michael Onfray in his *In Defense of Atheism. The case against Christianity, Judaism and Islam* (2007) has this to say about the distant forerunners of the present day Israelis.

"God promised a land that would be theirs 'for an everlasting possession' (Genesis 17:8) to his people [the Jews]. They were the elect, the chosen, singled out from among all others, raised above the common herd, a 'peculiar treasure unto me' (Exodus 19: 5). Did some unassuming race already inhabit that land? Did people cultivate its fields? Did their toil nourish children and the aged? Did men of mature age tend herds of livestock there? Did women give birth? Did their young receive schooling? Did the people worship Gods? But these Canaanites were of little importance and God decided on their extermination: 'I will cut them off' he declared (Exodus 22: 23)." (2007: 179)

And through the invasions and bloodletting by this chosen people the Canaanites were mainly wiped out. Onfray continues,

"Yahweh blessed war and those who waged it. He sanctified combat, led it, supervised it, although admittedly not in person -- ectoplasm has trouble wielding a sword -- but inspiring his people. He sanctioned crimes, murders, assassination, gave his blessing to the liquidation of innocents, killed animals like men and men like animals. He could be humane (unless he was dealing with the Canaanites). He proposed an alternative to battle, offering slavery -- a token of goodness and love -- in its place. To the indigenous population of Palestine, already living there when the Hebrews arrived he promised total destruction -- holy war, to use the terrifying and ultramodern expression of Joshua" (6: 21).

"For two thousand five hundred years no leading figure descended from the chosen people has declared that these pages are rooted in fable, prehistoric and highly dangerous -- because criminal fictions and nonsense. Quite the contrary. There exist on this planet a considerable number of people who live, think, act and conceive of the world on the basis of these texts that call for generalized butchery.... Yeshiva students memorize these passages, no more inclined to change a single comma than to touch a single one of Yahweh's hairs." (2007: 179-180)

That's well said. But strangely enough Onfray holds the exact opposite views about the current Israeli population whom he portrays as a peaceful, inward-looking, people. All their wars and militarism and ongoing murders are merely defensive actions he tells us (2007: 195).

This is not intended as sardonic humor on Onfray's part. He asks us to believe that present day Israel, which militarily drove out 750 thousand of the indigenous Palestinian population at its birth, a nation which has carried out almost nonstop raids
and wars against its neighbors for over sixty years, invading, killing and maiming, and seizing pieces of its neighbors territory, a nation which has connived to create a world class nuclear arsenal with the aid of its overseas supporters. Onfray says that Israelis are a peace loving people of an inward looking state. What they really are are just members of a murderous settler state, descendants of a recent amalgam of emigre Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian and western Europeans. To the extent that there are any descendants of the original Jews they are mainly the Palestinians.

Throughout the bible there are continuous references to the 'servants' of the leading Jewish families. Who and what were they? They were usually the slaves or indentured laborers of wealthy Jews, people who could be bought and beaten, maimed and sometimes killed by their masters. If a 'servant' was permanently maimed by his owner then he was supposed to be released by him. But if he died of a beating and his death occurred more than two days after the event his owner was in no way responsible for his death. This is clearly written in ancient Jewish law.

Elizabeth Anderson in “If God is Dead, Is Everything Permitted?” in Christopher Hitchens The Portable Atheist (2007) holds that traditional religious scripture is still seen as the basis for theist claims about the existence of god. Such scripture presumes that god is the fount of all moral proscriptions and his doings are a light unto the world. However she holds that morality does not generally flow from religion except in the claims of the religious. Moreover, the 'morality' prescribed by religions may be totally at odds with that held by others. The lessons handed down by religious specialists do not usually flow from any supernatural being but are simply the accretions of historical cultural traditions.

"What conclusions should we draw from Scripture about God's moral character and about how we ought to behave .... Consider first God's moral character as revealed in the Bible. He routinely punishes people for the sins of others. He punishes all mothers by condemning them to always painful and historically often fatal childbirth, for Eve's sin [she ate the apple of carnal knowledge in the Garden of Eden, remember]. He punishes all human beings by condemning them to labor, for Adam's sin (Genesis 3:16-18). He regrets His creation and in a fit of pique, commits genocide and ecocide by flooding the earth (Genesis 6:7). He hardens Pharaoh's heart against the fleeing Israelites (Ex. 11:5) so as to provide the occasion for visiting plagues upon the Egyptians, who as helpless subjects of the tyrant had no part in Pharaoh's decision. God kills all the firstborn sons, even of the slave girls who had no part in oppressing the Israelites (Ex. 11:5). He punishes the children, grandchildren, great grand children and great great grandchildren of those who worship any other god. He sets a plague upon the Israelites, killing twenty-four thousand because some of them had sex with the Baal worshiping Mideonites (Num. 25: 1-9). ... This is only a sample of the evils celebrated in the bible -- that god is one of the most bloodthirsty creatures one can imagine.. Can all this cruelty and
injustice be excused on the grounds that God may do what humans may not?” (Anderson: 2007: 336-337)

The answer given by orthodox believers is that God is all powerful and is permitted to do whatever he wishes to do. The only proper response of humans should be to praise him and to attend to his every whim. It is the ideology of a bunch of desert barbarians who have translated their own behavior into the doings of their god. He is the agent of mass murder and if he had existed it would have behooved all decent people to eternally oppose him. Fortunately he doesn't and never has existed.

As an aside we may note that the gods of peoples on the periphery of the Jews are all considered to be evil demons by religious Jews. They are usually treated with contemptuous scorn in the old testament. Yet despite this some of the Jews recurrently fell under the sway of these 'foreign gods'. It would be interesting to hear what the believers in such gods had to say about Yahweh and his followers, whether he was treated by them as an evil demon. One can imagine Babylonian mothers warning their children of the evil ways of this Jewish demon and his mass murder of innocents. If the Jews had ever been the victims of genocidal massacres like those described in the Old Testament their descendants would today still be proclaiming the unique oppression they had borne.

**Ten Commandments, More or Less**

Since the so-called Ten Commandments are allegedly at the heart of the Old Testament it may be useful to provide a brief overview of them. Let's consider a thumbnail interpretation of how the orders apply. First of all it should be understood that these commandments apply only to Jews and not to anyone else. While Yahweh is claimed to be the supreme god of the Jews the Old Testament does not hold that he is the only god, just the Jewish one. He is not necessarily forgiving or benign, nor does he seem to be omnipotent or omniscient. People are constantly circumventing his proscriptions without him knowing about it.

To orthodox Jews any Jews married in any way other than by orthodox rabbis and procedures are considered unwed and their children bastards, an irredeemable condition which they pass on to their offspring forever. Today this includes the great majority of American Jews who by orthodox standards should comprise a class of pariahs forever excluded from having any effective role in proper Jewish society. Moreover, there are stringent strictures about Jews mingling with non Jews in any way. The only guide that such relationships is that they be as superficial and as transitory as possible.

Furthermore, when the Jewish god Yahweh is incensed that some Jews have not followed his endless proscriptions his wrath falls on everyone within the Jewish community. It is difficult to not regard this figure as a god who punishes people not for what they have or have not done but because of their membership in a group whose actions he currently is at odds with.

The so-called Ten Commandments are found in two places in the bible, in Exodus 20: 1-17 and in Deuteronomy 5: 6-21. They are not exactly the same and this
overview is based on the list given in Deuteronomy because they are more simply stated there. There are actually considerably more than ten commandments scattered throughout the bible, a few of which are noted after the ten discussed. There are also about two dozen laws having to do with cattle, who is responsible for damages they cause, where they may graze and so forth.

The 'prescriptions normally held to be the ten commandments are as follows.

1. *Thou shalt have no other gods before me.* The early Jewish writings were not truly monotheistic because while they denigrate the gods of all other peoples they do apparently grant that such do exist. They also leave open the issue of Jewish believers retaining lesser sacred entities such as household spirits, magical charms, god-inspired prophets etc.

2. *Thou shalt not worship any graven images and thou shalt not bow down to or serve them.* This probably insured that no Jewish painting or sculpture or other plastic arts ever developed where this religion prevailed. Otherwise it is mainly a taboo on idol worship.

3. *Thou shalt not take the name of thy God in vain.* Could one insert the name of another god to curse something? Such as 'Baal damn it'? Probably not since this would constitute appealing to other gods. Taking the Jewish god's name in vain could be a capital offence, as were many other proscriptions.

4. *Thou shall honor thy god and keep his Sabbath day holy.* This says nothing about what keeping something holy entails. It came to mean not working or doing anything whatsoever on this day (unless one were a non-Jewish servant of the Jews). It meant going to synagogue on at least one day a week and not working, repairing, cooking or doing any thing on that day. There was a long list of acts prohibited on this day but they do not include sexual intercourse, so there were at least fifty two occasions in a year when people could come together fruitfully and multiply.

5. *Thou shalt honor thy father and mother.* Again, the commandment does not specify what 'honoring them' entails but presumably it entails retaining whatever narrow understandings they have with no back talk. It also means supporting them in old age if they have insufficient slaves or servants to support themselves. Moreover Jewish parents were supposed to hold powers of life and death over their offspring and were justified in killing them if they should offend them.

Another proscription commands the death of anyone seeing his parents naked. The demands of righteousness can be pathological.

6. *You shall not steal.* This may mean stealing from other Jews but does not necessarily include extortionate business deals or 'stealing' the lives of slaves and servants through exploitation and bound labour.

7. *Thou shalt not kill or murder.* Except when your political leaders command you or incite you to do so or when engaged in a war or when you partake in stoning people to death or for a host of other exceptions. Certainly killing people was no less common among believers in the Old Testament than it was for any others.

8. *Thou shalt not commit adultery.* This apparently means having sex with a female outside of marriage but I am unsure whether it applies to having sex with female
slaves or servants. This happens fairly frequently throughout the Old Testament. Moreover, throughout the era of the Old Testament wealthy men might have numbers of wives, who might be changed through divorce proceedings.

9. *Thou shalt not bear false witness against they neighbor.* However by the time Jews were living in towns there probably were people like 'legal advisors' who could council people on how to effectively provide 'false evidence' against others without being seen as having done so.

10. *Thou shalt not lust after thy neighbors wife or his servant or his ass.* It is uncertain how distant someone must to be before one can lust after them. In one reading even having lustful thoughts about someone constituted a breach of this commandment. This is would make almost everyone a sinner in god's eyes.

The above list comes from (Deuteronomy pp. 217-218) in the King James version of the Holy Bible.* There are numerous other commandments scattered throughout the bible which are not given a place on the top ten list. A number appear in Deuteronomy chapters 5 and 6, a few of which are,

- Thou shall not suffer a witch to live
- Anyone who blasphemes shall be put to death
- Anyone who commits a homosexual act shall be put to death
- Anyone found to have lain with an animal shall certainly be put to death.

These prohibitions sound like those enforced when the Taliban were in power in Afghanistan -- stoning people to death was much in fashion in Israel and Judea. There are also numerous legal prescriptions about who is responsible for injuries done by cattle and what a slave owner can legitimately do to his servants. If he beats one so that they lose the sight of an eye he allegedly must release him, but if his slave dies more than two days after a beating he has given them then he is not responsible for his death.

The commandment that one 'shalt love thy neighbor as thyself' is not one of the ten commandments. There is also the long list of dietary and social prohibitions which constitute the basis of Jewish orthodox life. Supposedly there are more than six hundred sacred proscriptions and holy laws in Orthodox Judaism, a number of them involving the death penalty.

*Footnote.* The role of variable wealth and standing within a community probably determined whether a claimed breach of the law was pursued or not and what the outcome would likely be.

**The Book of Esther. Power, and Mass Murder Justified**

One of the more chauvinistic and bloodthirsty of the tales in the Old Testament revolves around a Jewish vizier, his rival and how a Jewish dancing girl is used to have the rival and all of his people put to death. This is only one example of the laudatory treatment of genocide evinced in The Holy Bible.
The Book of Esther has a strangely Hollywood-like quality to it, a morality tale of a Jewish vizier and his popshe Esther in the court of the King of the Babylon. It is set in the period when some Jewish leaders were being 'held in captivity' in the city of Babylon, during circa 600 B.C. but in all probability was written later. The account was presumably not intended as a cautionary tale about how opposing Jews anywhere was suicidal.

For a ruler of the known universe the Babylonian king, Ahasuerus, must have been exceedingly dumb. Rather than leaving well enough alone he decided to utilize some Jewish administrators in his court. This captivity involved the movement of a few thousand of the more influential Jewish families in Palestine to the environs of Babylon. Within a few generations they had multiplied and were doing very well for themselves in this new land. Whereas the bulk of the Jewish population remained in their homeland and continued to herd their sheep and goats, producing little more than a limited diet of figs, yoghurt, barley tortillas and raucous prophets, the captivated Jews began to acquire some elements of civilization. They finally learned how to read and write and they learned the skills of accounting. Above all they learned about urban living and developed what would later be known as 'Our Holy Beliefs'.

The tale begins with an established Jewish grand vizier of the Babylonian Empire, one Mordecai, who learns that he is about to be replaced by a rival, someone called Hamman. So far the Jews have done rather well for themselves, taking over government posts and thriving in trade (despite the raucous complaints of sundry wailing prophets). Naturally there were indigenous people who resented these foreign rent and tax collectors. This was a unpardonable crime in the eyes of the Jews.

The old vizier, Mordecai, is shocked to learn that his power and wealth were soon to be lost to a new vizier from a rival ethnic group. He was in fact replaced but first arranged a meeting with other senior Jews in Babylon. However they had no worthwhile suggestions to make.

Hamman, the new vizier, is from another group, the Agagites, and is allegedly anti-Semitic. What else could he be if he threatens Jewish interests? Now it just so happens that the old vizier overhears the secret plans of Hamman for the Jews as he is walking near the city gates one day. Hamman plans to have them all stripped of their wealth and powers. That such secret plans are being bandied about at city gates is treated as a believable fact in this bible story. Right. What to do?

It so happened that the then current Babylonian King was a pussy-whipped womanizer who spent much of his time in his harem. The old vizier Mordecai quickly takes stock of his options and decides to introduce a beautiful Jewish popshe into the King's entourage. She happens to be his newly acquired 'niece' (that's the term used in the bible anyway). Esther apparently is stunningly beautiful and also has great natural acting ability. She knew when to buck and when to be sadly demure. At first sight the King falls head over heels in lust with her and is soon knowing her from morn to evening. The hook is set and it now only requires being reeled in. Esther appears at the King's bed one evening teary eyed and disconsolate. When he asks what bothers
her she replies that all of her people face death at the hands of Hamman, the new vizier, when he is firmly in power. She knows this because her uncle has told her so.

The King calls in Hamman but the former vizier also turns up with his account of the plot he heard at the city gate. When Hamman attempts to discredit that tale Mordecai doles out additional evidence of the alleged plot, evidence almost as convincing as his original tale. The King naturally believes his former vizier and has the new one arrested. He then tells Esther to ask of him what she may to lighten her heart. She asks for the public hanging of the new vizier, his wives and all their children. The King is taken aback by the bloodthirstiness of his favorite popishie, but she insists on her requests. So a few days later the new vizier, his wives and all their children are executed on a public square.

The tale revolves around Ester's moral fibre because she refuses to relent and watches as Hamman and his entire family are strangled in public by the royal executioner. Wonderful, very biblical.

Unknown to the King the reinstated Jewish vizier had secretly ordered the rounding up and execution of all members of Hamman's tribe, the Agagites -- men, women and children. The regional governors and military officials who received this order are so terrified by the old vizier, Mordecai, that they carry out this order without question. Some 75,000 of Hamman's tribe are slain, butchered because of their tribal connection with the rival vizier. It is the principle of racial guilt and righteous mass murder inherent in the bible.

The other Jews that were in the king's provinces "gathered themselves together, and stood ready to respond and had rest from their enemies, and slew seventy and five thousand, but they laid not hands on their prey." (Book of Esther, 9:16) The final words mean that the Agagites did not manage to kill any of the Jews This sounds like a people taken unaware who had conspired at nothing, not even their own self defense. We are told that the Jews then feasted over their victory. One might think that this is a good place for a bible story to stop but there is a little more to it.

As the tale ends all is well with the Jews in Babylon because of the old vizier's wiles and the 'courage' of Esther, an authentic Jewish heroine. Presumably she has become a virgin again as is only proper. Instead of these events being treated as a tale of past Jewish genocide they are portrayed as the righteous victors over their rivals. There are still Jewish children learning this murderous Old Testament lesson.

In all probability this story was fabricated by Jewish compilers of stories for the bible long after the event was supposed to have occurred. In such tales both the Jewish heroes and their rivals speak and act in the most simple minded manner, possibly appropriate for children's stories. Even if these events never occurred it demonstrates the blood thirsty lessons Jews were 'once' taught. Esther's tale was retold and expatiated over for the next 2,500 years. During Purim (spring festival) celebrations children are given baked fruit-filled pastries to nosh on which are called Hamansachen (Hamman things) in celebration of the death of an enemy of the Jews and all of his people.

The above is a condensed version of the Book of Esther in the Old Testament. You can read the complete story yourself -- it has not been fabricated here. The holy text
combines ethnic chauvinism, sex and genocide by the triumphant Jews. If it were not a part of the Old Testament it would today probably be charged as being an anti-semitic text.

Some Other Voices of the Old Testament

The kings of the Jewish states were rulers over quite limited regions. The endless victories of Jewish armies against all and sundry are clearly exaggerated fables which compilers of the Old Testament thought their listeners would believe. Possibly current archaeological findings about the events touched upon in the bible will present a truer rendering of what life was like in those times than what obtainable from the bible. Unless they are Mormon archaeologists doing the telling.

As for the Jewish prophets scattered through much of the old testament, they typically do not so much dispute the existence of gods of other people. The demand is mainly that the Jews worship only their own god and keep the ever growing number of restrictions embodied in their accounts. As for Yahweh, he possibly started as a storm god and was promoted to become the one and only god of the Jews. The Jews are his chosen people and he becomes crazy mad when his people stray to worship other gods.

According to the complaints of many of the prophets the Jews are always negligent in their duties toward their god, a demanding and vengeful entity who is forever showering them with his wrath over inconsequential non observances. It seems that for most of the prophets the Jews are an impious people who would be punished for their sins sooner or later. At least that is a recurrent theme of many prophets whose words have been preserved in the Old Testament.

Many commentators, both believers and unbelievers remark that the bible is a marvelous piece of literature, so movingly and poetically written etc., etc. On scrolling through it I find that it has none of these qualities for me. It starts with a mish mash of compressed Babylonian creation tales, proceeds with the proposition that only two people were needed for the peopling of the world, ones created by god from dust, who are initially ashamed to realize that they are naked. There's a snake in the tale to seduce the woman into disobeying one of god's commands -- 'Thou shalt not eat the apple of sexual desire and moral knowledge'. Later there is a story of god's mass murder of almost all of the world's population in the Great Flood -- all drowned, including the animals, for crimes which god himself created man capable of committing. And so on through an emigration from Egypt by a bunch of brick making helots to a new land inhabited by a more advanced people, the Canaanites, who they later systematically exterminate.

There follow tales of the endless slaughter of indigenous peoples (with god's help) or their conversion into slaves/servants of the Jews. Remember, this is their own tale of their past. When they are not murdering other people and taking their land the Jews are killing each other over grazing rights, land and women. As is well known, people invariably manufacture their god(s) in their own image. Parts of the Old Testament are far more bloodthirsty than the old 'Crime does not pay' comics of our childhood.
Possibly some comic strip illustrator could come up with a comparable Old Testament version of 'Bible Comics'. It might strike pay dirt today.

There is also a string of fantasy accounts of who begat whom and how many hundreds of years they allegedly lived until one gets to the first Jewish state under Saul and David and their great deeds. Wars of conquests and murder are the fulfillment of god's plan, we are told. Throughout the Old Testament the account is riven by pontificating and hate mongering prophets whose messages from god read like what one would expect in that sort of a society. The accounts of the prophets revolve mainly around recurrent threats of god's displeasure with the insufficient obedience or impiety of the Jews, or about them eating meat when they should be fasting. Plus assorted other earth shaking peccadillos.

Admittedly the section on Proverbs contains some revealing and pithy comments about that society -- about what one would expect to find in a neolithic village collection of lessons and admonishments. It is a sometimes sagacious collection of sayings and maxims of village life in the middle east some 25 centuries ago. Psalms is a collection of moral maxims praising Yahweh and counselling total abasement before him, as well as counselling believers to refrain from enjoying any of the good things of life while they are alive. Chronicles is a rambling series of tales about the Jewish Kings and the various peoples in the region who are to be subjugated or destroyed. It is also a partial account of various Jewish leaders, their holy deeds and failings. It is a series of strangely Hollywood-like tales of Israeli Kings, allegedly from circa 1900 BC to 688 BC -- with assorted plots and subplots set out in movie land spectacle style (David and Bathsheba, for example). The ‘Song of Songs' contains some rather good love songs but unfortunately we don't have the music to go with them. Few reasonable readers would claim that these songs convey any holy messages, unless as tributes to the joys of lust and sex. Who knows why the compilers of the bible included them.

Mixed through all of this are the assorted stories, prophetic warnings and murders at home and abroad. These are invariably accompanied by more prophets mauldering about sins, godly covenants and holy retribution. Apart from religious Jews who the hell should care about the warnings and laments of a bunch of middle eastern goat herders and rug merchants, their major and minor prophets of thousands of years ago?

The bible Old Testament is rife with both impossible and highly improbable miracles The real miracle may be that averagely intelligent people actually believe such tales.

The Old Testament contains many prophets who typically belabor their listeners about their insufficient piety and obedience to god's endless demands. With the occasional exceptions they forward dire warnings about anyone breaking the myriad of rules religiously set out. One prophet, Isaiah, demonstrates some appreciation for human failings but most of the others, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel, are filled with bottomless warnings about the laxness of Jewish lives. These prophets apparently arose mainly from the more rural and backward sectors of Jewish society and the tension between them and the rulers is a recurrent theme through that book.
One should remember that both Israel and Judea were headed by semi-tribal potentates often at odds with each other. The figures given in the bible about the vast armies they mobilized must be taken as highly exaggerated fantasy. Very few of the figures presented as facts can be taken as anything but gross fabrications. Similarly the dating of events in the bible involves little reliability and often deals with largely mythical events.

One quality running through the Old Testament is that most of the accounts are about those who are to some degree wealthy and/or influential. They are accounts of the deeds and desires of war chieftains but not usually those of the soldiers. The most one hear of the rank and file is that they feasted after a victory and took home the spoils of those defeated. There are tales of landlords whose lands are worked by slaves or servants. There are occasionally brief accounts of 'good servants' who manage to increase their master's wealth. But very little about the actual lives of 'servants' and the poor. Or about the extant society in general. One has to look far and wide to hear of those who were so impoverished that they gleaned (picked over) harvested fields and of the touted 'generosity. Or the landlords who allowed them to do so. Indeed one wonders how the great majority of the Jews actually lived, what they really believed, knew and did. The tales are those of kings and prophets as well as those of grain traders and landlords. The voices of artisans and of landless workers only rarely appear except as background figures. Nor is there much direct commentary by women, except as part of the stories of men. It is surprizing that there has been so little comment about the class skewed nature of the bible.
CHAPTER 6

The God of the New Testament

Christ and Evolving Christianity

In the New Testament we have stories told about its chief figure, the alleged son of god, Jesus the Anointed, and a version of his supposed teachings as set down by some of his later apostles. There is no direct account given by Jesus himself, none at all. He was probably illiterate and it is not even absolutely certain that he actually existed. Nor do we really know what he did say or teach. His message was written down 30 to 80 or more years after his death. Sometimes these accounts were transmitted by those who had allegedly once heard him but even that is unclear. These are the tales of the major and minor apostles, some of whom were not even born during Christ's lifetime. At the time 'Christianity' was a small Jewish sect which probably was not known by such a name.

Much of the writings in the bible are the letters of Saul/Paul to the various churches and apostles he had established around the southeastern flanks of the Roman empire. Saul had been a ferocious opponent of Christianity during his earlier life but had received a heavenly revelation about Jesus while on the road to Damascus. It almost fell out of the skies and allegedly struck him and temporarily blinded him -- Bop, Eureka. However he remained a pushy, fantasy-prone fanatic all of his remaining life, finding betrayal and the evils of womanly wiles about him everywhere. His treatment of women was clearly pathological and if he existed today he would probably be a prime candidate for psychological treatment in some facility. He was the real founder of the Christian faith but he had never met Christ during his life.

The New Testament was compiled only many decades after Jesus' death, and later apostles give differing accounts of Christ's message. Mark, Matthew, Luke, John were the primary apostles who along with Saul/Paul's letters to various Christian churches were the main contributors to this story. Along with relatively brief comments by minor apostles there are extended letters from Paul to the spreading communities of Christians within the Roman empire. Letters to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Thessalonians, Hebrews and so forth. The alleged
reminiscences about Christ take up much of the first half of that testament, while a chapter entitled 'Acts' deals with some of the mythic doings of the apostles after Christ's death.

We are never told anything about the early years of Christ or his secular life in general. Setting aside much later fantasy descriptions about his birth in Bethlehem, with falling stars, attendant angels, and visiting eastern wise men, there is next to nothing about his growing up or his young manhood. The account deals mainly with his last few years of preaching in Palestine.

Neither Saint Paul (Saul) nor most of the other apostles had met Jesus in person. Many were too young to have heard Christ preach or teach anything because Christ was already dead by the time they became active. Almost all of their testimonies about the doings and sayings of Christ were second or third hand accounts, mainly verbal remembrances passed down by those who were alleged to have heard him or manufactured by St. Paul and the others themselves. Jesus did not himself write any part of the bible, nor did he have it written through personal dictation to anyone else. Where he appears in the bible he and his sayings are portrayed exclusively through the reminiscences of others.

In one place Jesus scolds those who have robbed him of his possessions, in another he raises someone from the dead, here he damns a fig tree that does not give fruit and it immediately withers away, elsewhere he feeds multitudes who have come to hear him preach with a few fish and a handful of loaves. While preaching in Jerusalem he descends upon the tables of the money changers and drives them from their places around the Jewish temple. He allegedly performs a variety of minor acts which are later worked into deeds of great significance. For many the fact that something is said to have happened in the bible is proof enough that it did actually happen. If the bible said that the resurrected Christ rose up to heaven in a gold elevator it clearly must be so.

Jesus appears to have been another wandering Jewish preacher and sometime miracle worker -- a role which was fairly common in the region at the time (he could turn water into wine but no one said how drinkable a wine it was). Miracles are very thick on the ground at the time. Jesus seems to have been exclusively concerned in reaching Jewish audiences. He himself was apparently uninterested in reaching the hearts and souls of the goyim, who comprised the overwhelming majority people in the broader Mediterranean world. He was an exclusively Jewish prophet, preaching exclusively to Jews and with no interest in others. He says as much quite distinctly to a Samaritan woman who would join his following. His initial followers were exclusively Jews in Palestine and his original sayings were cast in the language (Aramaic) of his time. All of the bible, both the old and the new testaments, revolve around Jewish themes from start to finish. How such a view could have been foisted upon the entire western world is truly amazing. How Jesus' alleged teachings were transmitted to become the basis for a world wide religion is the one real miracle that hovers around the story.

Christians may not find the history of Christianity so utterly remarkable since its central figure is/was a god and with god all things are possible. But there were plenty
of gods floating around the Mediterranean at the time, a number of them given to appearing in human guises. Why this one struck such a responsive chord among the non-Jews is, to me, quite incomprehensible.

The spread of later Christianity was not necessarily voluntary, it was furthered by the forcible subjugation of various peoples by Byzantine emperors who normally saw to it that both his old and new subjects prayed to the right god and in the right church -- their's. No nonsense about 'freedom of religion' there. When this did not suffice Christian kings might slay all the pagan unbelievers who would not convert. This is the way Christianity was spread through Germany by Charlemagne the Great. It happened in the early ninth century shortly before Charlemagne was raised to the status of Holy Roman Emperor. There is no question that the Christian church was drenched in the blood of the believers in earlier religions.

But this is getting ahead of the story. I don't know what 'Christianity' was originally called, if anything. After Christ's execution and alleged resurrection he went on to live for forty days after his return from death (it is said). However he didn't seem to accomplish very much for a resurrected god. What did his disciples say about Jesus Christ during his two to three year active ministry? Christianity was, especially its early career, a clear and direct outgrowth of Judaism. It initially was a Jewish sect whose leaders were very leery of permitting non-Jews entry to it. Such expansion developed only after the Jewish revolt was crushed in circa 70 A.D. when increased external recruitment into the sect seemed called for. It is hardly surprising that the overwhelming majority of non-Jews in the late Roman empire deigned to have little to do with the promises of a bunch of rabid prophets from a land of religious fanatics.

The new testament fittingly ends with the offerings of someone called Saint John the Divine, set down about 60 or more years after Jesus Christ's death. The text of Revelations is an archetypal example of the ravings of a certain kind of psychotic. It combines megalomania with thinly disguised aggression. It deals with the final destruction of the earth by supernatural beings and has long been popular among certain preachers. There is a repetitive harping on particular numbers, the coded number of 'The Beast' (i.e. Rome), the specific numbers of angels and their tasks. This all culminates in and the opening of a specific number of seals accompanying the coming of the anti-Christ. There is a sea of blood naturally, as well as a Behemoth and a Leviathan, two monsters which arise from the sea and the land. The foreseen events go into high gear with the opening of the seventh seal which culminates with the destruction of the earth. It is clearly the product of a certain kind of psychosis which is still prevalent today.

No one knows why the compilers of the bible added these clearly mad revelations to the end of their holy book but it is a fitting conclusion for the entire work. The enthusiasm for the destruction of most of humanity, the murderous wrath of the author, the totally crazed vision offered -- they say a lot about the kind of people who believed such holy prophecy.

What does the Holy Bible have to say about man's (and occasionally woman's) doings in the world? Well it depends partly upon what passage we consult and what interpretation we place upon it. The King James Standard bible is only one of many
on offer and the wordings of more recent versions seem to be quite different from the original. Previous to the 1460's all bibles and other books existed only in hand written form and according to one compiler they are sometimes critically different, one copy from the other. Allegedly some 70,000 hand written bibles still exist, some of them with texts significantly different. I'm not sure if the commandment "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" is raised in the most recent bible texts but such changes count as blasphemous tampering with the eternal word of god, say the fundamentalists. They hew to the original King James version, which itself was a compilation and selection of various earlier translations.

I don't believe that the theologian/scholars who translated the original sources of the bible, drawn from Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic, into the King's English version are held to have been themselves divinely inspired and directed. There must have been considerable leeway in how they translated words and passages from the ancient languages into 17th century English. On some topics they were rather circumspect. What the literal translations of the ancient texts were and what was intended by them has been a theme of Bible study for centuries. There are sometimes fundamental disagreements among scholars.

In any case, what is said in one part the bible is sometimes contradicted by other accounts in the same text. Richard Dawkins (in *The God Delusion*, 2006) provides a citation of one of the apostles holding that the period between the Jewish King David and his allegedly direct lineal descendant, Joseph, the husband of the Virgin Mary, was twenty-seven generations while another biblical commentator says the number of generations between them was forty-one*. To most readers this will seem like nitpicking but this book is supposed to be the divinely inspired word of god, every word of it. Compared to other accounts in the bible this is nitpicking but it is revealing that the apostles of Christ got such simple things wrong.

*Footnote. The manufactured ancestry of Joseph was of importance to the Jewish Christians since they believed that a lineal connection with King David was needed for the awaited messiah.

It should be clear that the old testament, and most of the new testament as well, is composed of tales about Jewish characters and their opponents. There are as well some pithy village proverbs. But it is seemingly devoid of the pan-Mediterranean culture which had developed well before many events presented in the bible had happened. How is it that such childish nonsense came to supplant the far more vital Mediterranean culture and ultimately to destroy all the older world views in Europe? It's not only native American aboriginals who should be complaining about the cultural destruction which befell them but also Europeans who should charge Christianity with such deeds.

One thing which is clear is that 'Christianity' (it wouldn't have been called that during the Christ's lifetime*) was initially a reform movement within Judaism which later shifted to enrolling a preponderance of non-Jewish members. It began to spread through the Roman/Byzantine Empire and faced occasional persecution by that state.
However in the early 4th century it gained the support of the Byzantine Emperors, for reasons that are not clear, and rapidly became the official religion of that regime, during which time it destroyed and vandalized the shrines of all other gods and forcibly converted all believers in traditional gods within its sphere. It instituted a program of book burning and anti-intellectual know nothingism.

*Footnote. "Christos apparently comes from the Greek and simply means anointed. So 'Jesus Christos' means merely 'Jesus the anointed one'.

What gave Christianity the power to do so much harm, to be so destructive of the civilizations on which it imposed itself? The Roman empire was under increasing attack by enemies from the north and east, from groups which strove to usurp power over the European world during the early years of Christianity. In the end leaders of all such external forces threw in their lot with the Christian church and helped extend it through their realms. Let us consider some comment on Christianity as it evolved away from its Judaic roots.

As Bertrand Russell noted in Why I am not a Christian (1956)

"The intolerance that spread over the world with the advent of Christianity is one of its most curious features, due, I think, to the Jewish belief in righteousness and in the exclusive reality of the Jewish God."

Russell held that the other different gods and retained a worldly outlook. Religions of that time generally tolerated beliefs in

"... the Jews, and more especially the prophets, invented emphasis upon personal righteousness and the idea that it is wicked to tolerate any religion except one. These two ideas have had an extraordinarily disastrous effect upon Occidental history. The Church has made much of the persecution of Christians by the Roman State before the time of Constantine. This persecution, however, was slight and intermittent and wholly political. At all times, from the age of Constantine to the end of the seventeenth century, Christians were far more fiercely persecuted by other Christians than ever they were by the Roman emperors. ... It is true that the modern Christian is less robust [in his persecutorial will] but that is not thanks to Christianity; it is thanks to the generations of Freethinkers, who from the Renaissance to the present day, have made Christians ashamed of many of their traditional beliefs.” (1956: 35-36)

Early Christianity

One thing should be noted about Jesus the Christ, whatever claims were made in his name by Saint Paul and the others. Jesus always held that he was an upholder of Jewish laws and customs. If that be the case he must also have been an upholder of
the endless transgressions for which death was prescribed by the Old Testament and
the Jewish laws. For blasphemy, for adultery (if you were a woman), for working on
the Sabbath, for worshipping other gods, for witnessing one's parents naked, and for
the endless number of other capital 'crimes' mentioned in the Old Testament. If Jesus
once saved one woman 'taken in adultery' he rarely seems to have protested other
brutal oppressions committed by the laws in that land.

One of the standard justifications by current defenders of Christianity is that the
pathological viciousness of the bible, Old or New testaments, must be seen as the
responses of humans in rather backward societies. That they were doing the best they
could under conditions of near universal ignorance and often of social chaos. One
should in no way accept such arguments. There were probably many ordinary people
who rose far above biblical standards.

Throughout most of its history Christianity has been a thoroughly totalitarian
ideology. It's early history is largely lost in the mists of later mythology. While it did
face some persecution during the late Roman Empire this often stemmed from its
members' refusal to swear allegiance to the Roman Emperor as a god because of their
religious beliefs. Michael Onfray (2007) suggests that the total number of Christians
slain by Roman persecution ranged in the tens of thousands not in the hundreds of
thousands. The last of such pogroms occurred at the very beginning of the fourth
century A.D. Following that it would be the Christians carrying persecutions of non-
believers in their religion. The belief in the necessity that everyone must belong to
their cult distinguished Christianity from the earlier religious beliefs.

Christianity won its initial special prerogatives after an alleged divine sign
appeared in the sky which foretold the Byzantine Emperor Constantine's military
victory over the Roman Emperor in southeastern Gaul in 312 A.D. After that
Constantine favoured Christian clerics in the dispersal of properties formerly held by
Roman and Greek pagans. He fully utilized the Christian church's directions to its
followers to deliver dutiful submission to that state and its Emperor. The rewards in
lands, monies and honors were considerable.

Between 312 and 520 A.D. the web of Christian autocracy steadily tightened.
Within a single century Christianity became the official religion of the empire.
Initially the Byzantine Emperor was the pope of the early Christian church and under
the combined direction of both church and state strict new legal measures were taken
against all political opposition and also against perceived sexual licentiousness and
various forms of 'immorality'. The legal measures taken against believers of the
traditional religion and learning were constantly tightened.

Many of the church leaders spoke and wrote and acted vociferously against
all established learning, ushering in the dark age which was to come. They had
absolutely nothing to put in place of the fund of existing knowledge other than their
own theocratic pottage. Libraries were systematically destroyed by Christian mobs; in
some cases possession of private libraries became evidence of unChristian views.
(There were plenty of legitimate reasons to hold anti-Christian views.) Somewhat
later the children of adults who were not members of Christian churches were
compelled to attend classes in Christian teachings. Finally all non Christians were
disallowed participation in any governmental matters and required to transfer their possessions through inheritance to Christians or have their wealth confiscated by the state. Much of this wealth was conveyed to the Christian churches.

Many believers in traditional gods and beliefs were killed, either by Christian mobs or executed by the state under various pretexts. Emperor Constantine himself led the persecution of the followers of Arius and other sectarian branches of Christianity. As a culminating act of Christian terrorism, in 415 A.D. a leading mathematician, a healer and a NeoPlatonic philosopher, a woman known as Hypathia of Alexandria, was seized by a Christian mob, dragged into one of their death cult temples, where the faithful proceed to kill her by scraping off her flesh with sea shells. She became a martyr for later opponents of Christianity and its bloodthirsty fanaticism. And so she was.

Throughout this period there was a rising crescendo of destruction of any and all pagan temples and statues and even secular art. All of which had been created by the previous much more cosmopolitan civilizations. Leading clerics defended and led such destructive forays. By that time leading pagans had largely been converted, killed or driven underground. The final stroke of Christian totalitarianism occurred in 529 A.D. when the NeoPlatonic school in Athens was closed and its property seized by the Byzantine state. Christianity attempted to suppress much of the understandings of the previous pagan world in order to impose their own superstitions. To the world's great loss they largely succeeded. (This outline is taken largely from Michael Onfray’s account in In Defense of Atheism (2007: 140-152).)

Over the following centuries the Gnostics, the Copts of Egypt and Ethiopia, the Nestorians of the middle east and other sects elsewhere were all expelled from the true Orthodox Christian church. The ideological distinctions between them are well nigh incomprehensible. Today they seem like disputes over just how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

Some of the believers in classical gods and beliefs escaped to exile in Persia but most had to remain where they were. By the beginning of the 6th century Christian churches held power over the Mediterranean lands in conjunction with the Byzantine Empire. The spread of Christianity and its supporters throughout the Roman-Byzantine Empire reads like the spread of fascism in later times. Throughout this period and until much later Christianity was the driving force behind an upwelling of ignorance and fantasy mongering.

Between the 8th to 15th centuries Christian Europe was threatened by Muslim invasion and conquest so the church imposed stricter ideological control on its people and mobilized feudal lords for crusades against Moorish Spain and the 'holy land' (Palestine). Along with these foreign crusades the Catholic church authorized far more crusades against rebellious European peasants and the emergent sectarians. The crusade against the Albigensians was merely a minor part of such repression.

We have had little to say about the operation of the Orthodox Christian churches in eastern Europe or about the emergence of Protestantism which began to emerge by the early 16th century. The lands of Russia were only gradually converted to Orthodox Christianity beginning in the late 11th century and on. To paraphrase Helen
Potrobenko's sardonic account in her *No Streets of Gold*, a history of Ukrainians in Alberta, ‘The Tsar sent his soldiers to surround the peasant villages and proclaimed that they were all Christians or they were dead. It was amazing how many people discovered a fervid belief in Christianity’. Naturally all kinds of preChristian beliefs and allegiances continued for centuries after regions officially became Christian.

After a long history of disputes and existing as separate entities within the Christian world, the Orthodox churches of eastern Europe and portions of the middle east finally separated from Roman Catholicism in the 13th century. The Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, Rumanian, Russian and Armenian Orthodox churches left the fold. By then there were very bad relations between the Orthodox and the Catholic churches. Indeed, a Catholic crusade set out and did take and sack Greek Constantinople near the end of the crusades. The Orthodox churches also developed some sectarian splinters, such as the Old Believers, the Skoptzi, Dukhobors and other now forgotten sects.

Christianity and the Catholic church did not stand outside the dark ages and help preserve at least some of the learning and culture which had existed before Christianity arose. No. To a very large extent the Christian church was that dark age, an age of trembling fears of lurking evil spirits and of punishing gods, of bed rock know-nothingism, of the imposition of servile serfdom over the majority of European peoples. Christianity also had a hand in maintaining the feudal orders which arose from what had been a more urbane and integrated social system.

That period in western history is rightly known as the dark age since so much of the previous culture, urban life, trade, travel and human knowledge gradually was dissipated. Throughout the middle ages Europe degenerated into a warring patchwork of feudal lords and evanescent kingdoms while the peasantries rapidly descended into becoming serfs, with vast tracks of land held by the churches, monasteries and local lords. Despite the recurrent claims of the church to the preservation of classical knowledge, the era entailed a large step backwards. It is probable that a general worsening and shortening of human life applied throughout Europe.

In the centuries following 1300-1500 A.D. church-directed witch and heresy hunts emerged to harry the population. It was a bestial period in European history. It was an era of low per capita agricultural and artisanal production, of very large tracts of land returning to forests and brushland, of very high infant mortality and shortened life spans in general. It was an era of ignorance mixed with supernatural fantasies. It was from this dark world that some humans gradually freed themselves. Those who later painted a romantic picture of a supposed idyllic security, based upon a single universal church, in which feudal landlords fulfilled their duties toward their serfs and tenants, are simply silly reactionaries. While it is indisputable that many ordinary people acted as auxiliaries to the witch finding and heresy hunting endeavors of the times it was the emerging states whose support was crucial.

Roman Catholicism produced many sects throughout the later middle ages -- the Waldensians, the Albigensians and the Brethren of the Free Spirit in Bohemia and many more now largely forgotten. But the church usually did not have much trouble in suppressing them. According to some accounts the church sanctified far more
The crusades aimed at suppressing peasant risings in Europe than all the crusades they launched against Islam.

From the beginning of the 16th century Catholicism became involved in two centuries of struggle with fellow Christians to extirpate the claims of competing Protestant factions. This reformation lasted until the end of the 17th century and possibly culminated in the Thirty Years War in Germany (1618-1654), which involved soldiers from most of the European nations of the time. These struggles were supremely brutal and bloody conflicts, the costs in lives and devastation being paid mainly by ordinary villagers and the laboring poor. It was an era in which apocalyptic accounts did often approximate reality.

The Christian church's attitude toward witchcraft changed diametrically about a thousand years after the church's foundation. Until the beginning of the crusades in the late eleventh century the church's position had been that witchcraft was a pagan delusion, that god did not grant such powers to humans. Its ministers were directed to oppose such beliefs among the faithful and that whatever they did they must not involve themselves or the church in the maintenance of any such beliefs. Indeed, a number of papal encyclicals were issued by the church between 600 and 1000 A.D., underlining the church's disavowal of any belief in witchcraft. So much to the good.

However in the years during and following the crusades (c. 1100-1300 A.D.) the then sitting popes (or the curia) made a 180 degree turn and began to both acknowledge the existence of witches and witchcraft and to mobilize the church in their pursuit and extermination. It was claimed that witchcraft involved adherence to the devil, who had supernatural powers which he and his followers could use for evil. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the witch finding craze was well under way and would last into the early eighteenth century.

What the real rationale behind the church's diametric change on this issue was is unknown by me. It has been suggested that it introduced a mechanism for church-directed terror amongst the wavering faithful. Belief in the existence of witches had remained a folk belief outside of the Christian church before that. Resorting to belief in witchcraft must have been something other or more than the simple evil of the Christian churches and the bestiality of the witch hunters themselves. It was clearly a system of church/state terrorism. Anyone who failed to accept the given rationales of witch hunting was a potential target themselves. The victims were overwhelmingly the poor, the socially isolated and predominantly women. But witch hunts could get out of hand at times and kill even respectable burghers.

Like charges of heresy, anyone charged with being a witch was guilty until he or she could prove themselves innocent -- an unlikely outcome considering what counted as evidence of guilt and the nature of the witch hunters themselves. Admissions were typically obtained by torture while the utter insanity of the 'evidence' used to convict was summarized in The Hammer of the Witches, an all inclusive catalogue of what counted as indications of the involvement of witchcraft written by two Dominican monks.

While witch hunts began in Catholic Europe, with the emergence of Protestantism a shift began to take place. The protestant faithful became predominantly involved in
witch hunting while a comparable process of heresy hunts spread through Catholic countries, especially Spain. While there was a believable basis for heresy charges -- after all what rational person could believe the fantasies spun by the church -- there could be no factual basis for witchcraft charges whatsoever. In retrospect, if there had been a just and benign god all those involved in such endeavors would have been exterminated before they could carry out their schemes. The fact that such despicable processes were allowed to continue for centuries should have convinced reasonable observers that no omniscient, benign and all-powerful god existed. Or that if he did his interest in human justice was nil.

The initial balanced historical treatment of the Inquisition emerged in America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with some remarkable scholarship produced by one Henry Lea in his *The Inquisition of Spain*, Vol. 1-4 (1906-1907) plus many comparable volumes. Over the course of a lifetime he seems to have perused most of the extraordinarily complete documents for the Spanish Inquisition from its inception until the early 19th century.

Lea's works are remarkable documents which seem to validate what the anti-Catholic propaganda of an earlier time claimed -- the practiced brutality and fanaticism of those who advanced the inquisition. What we should keep in mind is the fact that the states of northern Europe, especially England, jailed, tortured and murdered roughly as many individuals through treason trials and through witchcraft charges as did the Catholic Inquisition. Possibly more. This was certainly the case for Elizabethan England where a wide roster of laws punished people for being poor and not in the service of established masters.

**The Spanish Inquisition of the Church Militant**

The Spanish inquisition arose some 200 years after the Holy Office for the Propagation of the Faith, the original Papal Inquisition, had set out to combat the heresies which emerged in the 13th century. The Albigensian order has since garnered sympathy among western liberals as early victims of the Catholic inquisition but they may have been simply another oppressive variant of Christianity, one with a mystical view of reality but maintaining a comparable oppression of serfs. The mother church launched a crusade against the Albigensians in France and over the course of fifty years utterly wiped them out.

This was an era when the Papacy set out to combat both heresy and witchcraft in Europe. Witchcraft until then was held by the church to be a pre-Christian illusion which the church should try to overcome and in no way to validate. The papal authorities however sanctified crusades by European lords against their own rebellious peasantry. The campaigns against heresy were initially rather spasmodic but this changed dramatically with the emergence of the Spanish Inquisition which was established in 1474.

By the late 1400s Spain had experienced some 750 years of Moorish occupation under which a comparatively sophisticated civilization had emerged, although one partly based on slavery. Along with their endless internal civil wars the Moorish states were slowly driven back during 700 years of warfare. With the defeat of the
last Moorish kingdoms of Grenada and Malaga in 1492 Spain was faced with 1.5 million newly conquered Moslems, some 300,000 Romanis and some hundreds of thousands of Jews, none of whom were particularly eager to join the Spanish nation. Which had not yet consolidated itself over the entire peninsula.

The King of Spain and his councillors ordered all the Moors and the Jews to either convert to Catholicism within a given period or leave Spain. In the following century about half the Jews left as did most of the Moors, after wide ranging oppression and armed resistance. They were ultimately deported to Morocco. Those Jews and Moors who converted to Catholicism became known as 'New Christians' and were recurrently suspected of backsliding to their previous allegiances.

The Spanish Inquisition was fully established in the later part of the 15th century and rapidly flowered into a system of directed terror with little parallel in Europe. It was a process organized and carried out primarily by the Spanish Catholic church, and it should be noted that the Inquisition arose before the emergence of Protestantism and cannot truly be seen as a response to that rival church. But it clearly was a means of consolidating Spanish control over its people. It was a purely Spanish institution, accepting Papal intervention in its decisions only a single time in its long history.

The Inquisition in Spain was heavily staffed, for some reason, by monks of the Dominican order -- one of the most oppressive in the church's realm. One of its leading bureaucrats, Thomas Torquemada (1420-1498) rapidly rose to power in the Spanish Inquisition and was appointed as its Inquisitor General. He established most of the methods, rationales, and procedures of the institution as it was to exist for three hundred and fifty years. He was clearly a religious sadist.

The procedure which emerged was that a roving commission of inquisitors, clerks, constables and torturers with their supporting apparatus moved into a town for an indeterminate period. When entering a new locale criers would read out an Edict of Faith which entailed a long list of the beliefs and rituals which true Catholics must hold and honor. Those who did not believe in the fantasies of the church were well advised not to share their unbelief with others. Following that came a 'Period of Grace' normally running for a month or so, in which those who knew of or who had partaken of heretical views and gatherings were to come forth and throw themselves on the mercy of the court and confess. Those who harbored misbeliefs or who knew of them amongst friends and neighbors but did not report them to the inquisition were guilty of ‘Contumacious Vacillation’ which carried the same punishment as the heresies not reported.

Accompanying the ‘Edict of Grace’ was an ‘Edict of Silence’ which required the faithful to inform the inquisition of anyone who they knew or suspected to have engaged in heretical thought or acts. This edict opened the floodgates for almost any kind of charge against almost anyone. The edict required the faithful to inform the inquisition of any seemingly incorrect religious beliefs they had heard of. It held that those who remained silent about suspect heretical ideas would be held guilty of those offenses themselves.
While this was underway ‘Denunciation Boxes’ were mounted in prominent locales which would receive the denunciations of others, and would gradually pile up. The wonder is that the Inquisition did not get almost everybody in town denounced by someone else. It is somewhat surprising that current law and order states have not yet utilized such processes to uncover suspected crimes.

Those accused of heresy (two secret accusations from separate persons were enough to arrest a person) would be snatched from their homes or from the street and disappear into ‘Carcelas Secretas’ (secret prisons) where no one heard from them again. No charge need be made against such prisoners and certainly no evidence against them was normally presented by the inquisitors. The victim had to guess from the questions put to him what the charge against him might be.

A great many of those thrown into prison on charges of heresy died in them before their cases were ever resolved. Henry Kamen (1967, The Spanish Inquisition) questimates that 100,000 of the 300,000 prisoners passing through secret jails for alleged heretics may have died in them before their trials were over -- died of malnutrition, lack of water, from the rampant diseases in such places, died of wounds inflicted by torture. This was in addition to those who confessed their heretical beliefs and were done to death elsewhere. Those who were arrested for heresy were presumed to be guilty from the outset.

Inquisitional courts included investigating judges, lawyers (but only for the prosecution) jailers, guards, torturers and clerks. They could cost a pretty penny but this was recouped from the confiscation of the victims' property. As hundreds of years of detailed inquisitorial bookkeeping verifies, the cost of the inquisition was borne mainly by its victims. The amounts were quite substantial but the Inquisition and all its hangers-on frittered it away down a thousand rat holes. However it impoverished the families of the victims, which was probably of primary importance to the inquisition.

Unless the accused admitted his/her guilt immediately they were bound in inhuman prisons and tortured to reveal their crimes sooner or later. The methods of torture were quite horrendous and the fact that an American government of the twenty-first century could resurrect them speaks to the irredeemable degeneracy of that regime. The Inquisition generally inflicted a maximum suffering through its torture, using all the pain-producing machines and methods it could devise. Normally the inquisitors themselves did not engage in torturing anyone, they left that to the work of their specialists. Branding, burning, slashing open appendages, crushing bone, stretching bodies into tormenting contortions. Everyone who supported the Inquisition is befouled by such crimes. You'll have to turn elsewhere to find blow by blow accounts of the procedures utilized -- they only bring forth unquenchable hatred in me.

Those who succumbed to the inquisitors normally had to supply the names of multiple conspirators, real or normally invented. This led to an ever broadening wave of accusations and further arrests. The fear it must have generated would have been enormous. None other than the nobility and the most wealthy were able to withstand the threat of the inquisition. The curia, the central government of the Catholic church
as a whole, intervened successfully with the Spanish Inquisition only once to have a prisoner released during the four centuries of its operation.

Since confessing to heresy would result in the loss of all one's property, money and belongings, as well as that of one's family some individuals withstood unbearable pain for astoundingly long periods. Possibly as many as 20% of those arrested failed to confess to heresy charges. An aspect of the cynicism which prevailed was the fact the inquisitors rarely themselves tortured or executed their victims. Instead they handed them over to the Secular Arm who did the dirty work for them.

Those who were ‘Reconciled’ with the church, who accepted the validity of the charges against them and the correctness of the Inquisition, might obtain a 'lesser punishment'. Such as being marched down the main streets of a town being whipped with up to two hundred strokes, to return to a life without any possessions (everything having been confiscated) to be shunned by one's neighbors.

‘Unreconciled heretics’ and ‘Apostates’ were those who did not accept the Inquisition’s charges or who had slipped back into heretical beliefs after punishment. They were committed to the flames without any real evidence presented or trial pursued. Apostasy was committed by anyone retracting confessions made under torture or otherwise. They were burned to death at the stake at the Quemadero (the burning place). In some instances the victims were placed between two fires which did not reach them and were slowly roasted to death over the span of hours. There were even some cases where individuals were acquitted by the Inquisition, but such cases were rather rare. Henry Kamen's *The Spanish Inquisition* (1967: 183) holds that "The number of acquittals were small -- between 1575 to 1610 some 51 acquittals out of some 1,600 cases of heresy accusations. An acquittal rate of some three per cent." A great many of those acquitted had previously undergone torture.

Over time, after about two hundred years, the charges laid by the Inquisition increasingly came to revolve around ‘impious sentiments’ such as blasphemous views about monks and priests or complaints against the exactions of the church or even about inappropriate manner of sex. By the 18th century the Inquisition revolved largely about attempts to suppress political subversion, such as Liberalism. The Spanish Inquisition was finally outlawed by the Spanish state in 1834, although some reactionary sectors of the Spanish population campaigned for its retention well into the 20th century.

**Some Statistics of the Spanish Inquisition**

Some rough statistics about the Spanish Inquisition stem from Henry Lea’s massive, life long study completed in the first years of the 20th century. Even those quibbling with him agree that his remains the basic work on the topic (Henry Lea, *Materials Toward a History of Witchcraft*, 1939, orig 1900-1910). It is based upon the voluminous, extremely complete documents preserved of the trials and procedures used almost from the beginnings of the inquisition till its end.

Over the 350+ year course of the Inquisition the casualties were as follows. Some 31,000 men, women and children in Spain were burned at the stake as well as some 20,000 burned in effigy because they had escaped and could not be found. They had
been tried in absentia. Circa 300,000 persons were convicted and sentenced to 'lesser' punishments, for instance to long term imprisonment in special jails or to long term sentences as rowers in galleys. This was usually only a somewhat slower sentence of death since few returned alive from such imprisonment.

An unknown but substantial number of deaths occurred during their imprisonment and 'examination', which sometimes lasted two or more years, during which time prisoners were held and tortured and starved. One estimate is that as many as one third of those arrested (some 100,000) died of malnutrition, disease, beatings and torture while they were being investigated. It is estimated that possibly some 20% of those 'investigated' by the inquisition refused to admit to the charges against them even under torture, although there are no figures of how long they lived after being released. They normally would have been physically broken individuals.

These figures amount to roughly 450,000 victims of the inquisition over its 350 year existence. Spain during this period had a population of from six to eight million inhabitants with an average life expectancy of let us say 50 years. This would roughly amount to about 1% of the population charged and imprisoned for heresy in a typical lifetime. This does not include the members of families in which a member had been charged. They were typically treated as pariahs afterwards. The scope of the Inquisition ebbed and flowed from period to period but it is evident that almost everyone would have known or known of someone who was or had been in the hands of the Inquisition.

As in witchcraft trials, the investigators invariably demanded to know of others who allegedly were implicated in heresy. This provided a vast pool of potential suspects for the inquisitors to investigate should they care to. The spreading circle of suspects sometimes touched upon those who had some capacity to defend themselves, in which case the church might curtail its investigations. But that was rare.

The above figures apply to the Spanish Inquisition alone and do not include persons charged with heresy in other Catholic countries in Europe and the Americas. The total number of victims would have been considerably larger.

As opposed to heresy witchcraft was a secular crime in all of western Europe, all states had laws against it usually prescribing death for those convicted. That was the punishment which the bible proffered. Estimates of those executed because of witchcraft charges are not at all certain and range well upward of 500,000 killed between the 14th to the 18th centuries. Witchcraft trials predominated in Protestant nations especially during periods of social upheaval. In Elizabethan England those officially murdered following witchcraft trials roughly approximated the deaths caused by heresy trials in Spain. In short, whether Catholic or Protestant, Christianity bears a heavy burden for people it tortured and murdered and terrorized over a long span of pre-modern history. The Inquisition and the centuries long pursuit of alleged witches was something more than a minor phase in the history of Christianity. It was an inextricable part of it.

*Christianity in the New World*
Leaving Europe and its ever fresh forms of oppression, how did religion fare when transposed to the other side of the sea, in the Americas? First there were the small but rapidly growing Spanish settlements in the Caribbean, Mexico and in northern and western South America during the early 16th century, while those in British North America first emerged in the early 1600s when the Spanish settlements in south western America were more than a century old.

Catholic priests accompanied the first conquistadores, to Mexico and Guatemala and shortly after to the upland regions of Peru and Ecuador. These happened to be the regions of indigenous crop domestication and sustained quite large and densely settled Indian lands. The church rapidly came to see the native populations as new souls to be converted and saved so they defended what they saw as Indian rights early on. Often in the face of opposition of those transplanted Europeans who wished to treat Indians as something comparable to slaves. The influence of the church on the Spanish crown was long central and soon the early forms of indigenous labor exploitation were rescinded, at least on paper.

The Catholic church then began a special relationship with the settled Indian populations, one of protection from the demands of the new Spanish landowners but also of a combined governmental and religious control. While undoubtedly many indigenous beliefs, family roles, and other cultural phenomena in general only gradually changed, the changes which were made were substantial and central. An American anthropologist in the late 1950s (George Foster) unearthed a social history of Andean Indian life which documented that a wide range of technology, agricultural techniques and even such phenomena as Indian herbal and medical treatments stemmed mainly from 16th century Spain and could be found in Spanish books of that period. The contemporary Indian practices only seemed indigenous distinctive because their Spanish bases had been so dramatically altered. This left some proponents of allegedly traditional Indian practices speechless and would today be quite unacceptable truths.

The general pattern of Catholic involvement in Spanish America (and Brazil) was that it was focused on Indian 'peasant' populations of the regions mentioned above but with virtually no contact with the burgeoning slave populations imported from Africa. There was also comparatively little church involvement with tribal populations of the western hemisphere (with the exception of the Jesuit order and the indigenous people of Paraguay). As for the white and Mestizo sectors, church adherence seems to have been mainly among women and from the upper class in general. Apart from their operation of the system of closed corporate Indian peasant villages the Catholic church increasingly became a voice of the wealthy almost every where, as it did throughout much of Europe.

This situation floundered during the wars of national liberation in which some priests, such as Fathers Hidalgo and Morelos in Mexico, played important parts. However by the mid nineteenth century the church's control of Indian peasant communities was under attack by 'Liberal' large landowners, who in some regions wound up holding much of the former Indian land. This certainly was the case in Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century.
The Mexican revolution of 1911-1922 was a long drawn out, amorphous conflict fed partly by Indian peasants attempting to regain lost lands and by assorted mestizos and whites fighting for assorted class claims. The revolution resulted in possibly ten per cent of the national population killed in the fighting or in the correlated famines and plagues. The main result was that the established landowners and capitalists were replaced by newly triumphant versions of the same sort.

Here and there communally owned land holdings (Ejidos) were distributed in the later 1920s and 1930s, especially under the leftist regime of President Cardenas. They were promoted with high hopes but were soon overtaken by the drive of rural populations fleeing to the rapidly growing cities. The Catholic church during this time, in a blind conflict with the post revolutionary political chieftains, launched into an open counter revolutionary revolt. It mobilized and despatched what are known as the 'Christeros', from their watchword 'El Christo Rey' (Christ is King). When this counter revolution was summarily crushed by Mexican forces it ushered in a generation during which the Catholic church was largely silent.

A somewhat different trajectory of events obtained elsewhere in Spanish America where in general native populations remained seemingly quiescent until the middle of the twentieth century. In extremely backward countries like Ecuador, the established forms of Indian exploitation remained almost as it had been a century before. However in Bolivia a rising largely manned by unionized, Indian miners in 1952 managed to defeat an anachronistically oppressive government and hold on to power for almost a decade. Until it too was toppled by an especially brutal military regime. However the 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of left-wing forces challenging the regimes in power almost everywhere in South America.

This overview of the church in Latin America has wandered far from my central topic, which may have tested the reader's patience. I must thank their indulgence.

In North America the French maintained some small settlements along the lower St. Lawrence River and in the Canadian Maritimes from the beginning of the 17th century. The English came later to the eastern shores of the present United States. In terms of class rule these colonies initially had little to differentiate them from Europe, despite the imaginations of later promoters of 'a new world of freedom'.

The religious allegiances of American settlers and their hired or indentured labour may have been different than popular accounts purport. By the time of the American revolution religious attendance was strongly class based, laborers and the other poor showing comparatively little interest in (or even being welcome at) the religious offerings of those who were better off. However following the war of independence, during the first two or three decades of the nineteenth century, America was rocked by a ground swell of evangelical conversion. Travelling gospel tent revivalists flourished along with crowds of eager repenters and gospel imbibers. This was accompanied by the splintering of Protestantism into a wide array of many sects. Many arose, flourished for a while and then sank into dissolution, with their followers joining other comparable sects. What caused this mass adhesion to Christianity,
which became nation wide long before the civil war? Undoubtedly there must be many answers given of which I am unaware.

Religion in America was exclusively Christian but included sects which were rather far removed from Christianity as it existed in Europe. By the 1850s it included Protestant forces which saw Catholicism as an alien and possibly satanic organization bent on the destruction of American freedoms. There were near endless sects scattered throughout the countryside, focused on charismatic (sometimes barely literate) preachers who conveyed their own beliefs they extracted from the bible. The Democratic party in particular evolved a system of political organization run by ward bosses which for generations depended upon the urban and Catholic vote which it mobilized. For any politician seeking public support it was essential to be known as an active Christian, regardless of how secular an individual actually was.

The urbanization which occurred following the American civil war gradually ate into the hold which churches had over their membership -- largely because fewer city dwellers attended churches. By or before the 1880s the first openly non or anti-religious groupings began to appear, some of them in the form of various socialist parties. They were of course quite atypical in America but by the beginning of the twentieth century some had garnered considerable support, especially among certain immigrant communities but also among western American resource workers. Possibly the high point of such sentiments was in 1912 to 1917 when a wide range of socialist candidates were elected to local, state and national offices.

All these efforts to electorally transform America were brought to a crashing halt by the decision of President Woodrow Wilson to take the nation into World War 1 and to impose a draconian repression of anything and anyone adhering to the left. The period 1917 to 1930 witnessed an emergence of almost fascist-like mass movements in America, fully supported by those in power. War time patriotism blossomed overnight and was supported by mass arrests and long prison sentences of those opposing America's entry into that war as well as a general dissolution of individual legal rights. America was seized by a directed mob rule of 100 percent American patriots. This was soon joined by a mushrooming, multi million member Ku Kluck Klan, by a newly emergent speculator class and by lowered real incomes for workers as well as the folderol of the 'Roaring Twenties'. Religiosity witnessed a new rebirth in touring revival movements and home town gospeler.

This largely came to a halt during the depression of the 1930s, during which time a seemingly fundamental shift in allegiances was made by many working people. By this time America was already an urban nation and small town provincialism had lost its grip on national programmes. It seemed that America was finally on the road to becoming a somewhat more egalitarian and progressive society, despite the horrendous conditions of the depression. That is the nation which entered World War 2 only to emerge seven or eight years later into the right-wing fanaticism of the McCarthy era and all that went with it. Reborn religiosity included.

This glib and limited overview of American history will end here with the hope that more recent developments are familiar to the reader.
CHAPTER 7

Christian Fundamentalism

What does 'fundamentalism' actually refer to in religious terms, other than the pejorative that it normally connotes? Websters New Collegiate Dictionary (1974) defines 'fundamentalism' as "... a movement in 20th century Protestantism emphasizing the literally interpreted Bible as fundamental to Christian life and teaching."

However Christian churches for centuries have evolved their own evaluation of what behavior counts as Christian and what does not. In a broader sense 'fundamentalism' has been a feature of Christianity almost since its inception. Contemporary fundamentalism is that which rejects any interpretations of the bible other than those which are literal renderings of its text.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries some Protestant theologians came to the conclusion that much of the Christian tradition could not be derived from the bible at all. Moreover there seemed to be no end of 'literal interpretations' possible by different persons from the same text. This and their feelings that Christianity was derived from the hopes of men and not the commandments of a god required a basic reevaluation of biblical beliefs. As opposed to such assessments fundamentalist interpretations imply a generally conservative stance, a desire to turn the social clock back to where it was at some past time. In that regard fundamentalism seems to be in no way restricted to Protestant Christianity nor to the early 20th century.

While we will here discuss Christian fundamentalism, which will be the most familiar to the reader, it should be understood that Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and some forms of Buddhism also contain 'fundamentalist' strains which can be equally or even more reactionary and oppressive. Amazingly this outlook can sometimes be combined with knowledge of advanced technology and science. As has often been noted the grandparents or the great grandparents of some current fundamentalists were considerably more secular and modern then are their descendants.

Fundamentalism is basically a retreat into the know-nothingism of the past. More importantly it is a move to reinstitute many of the religious restrictions which we believed we had put behind us. We have all witnessed or heard of the extended prohibitions, the punishments for newly proposed 'crimes', and the intellectual strictures of fundamentalism's attempts to impose its own beliefs on all those under its sway. It claims to hark back to the original precepts which were once held by
Christianity. In the last third of the previous century we were presented with a wide range of fundamentalist programs to turn our understandings back to those which prevailed in some small provincial town, like that portrayed by Sinclair Lewis a century ago. It has been a very bitter end to the 20th century.

It is widely held that Christian fundamentalism emerged in America near the end of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. That seems to dismiss the far older comparable strains in Christianity but let's say that fundamentalism did emerge much stronger a century ago. What might account for it? One answer is that fundamentalism was a reaction against the growing questioning of the biblical texts by once contemporary theologians. This may be so but American fundamentalism may also have been a reaction against other developments of that time, the piecemeal advances won by those enslaved by capitalism.

The early labor movements were not religiously inclined and were in some cases openly hostile toward organized religion. This fact may have channeled 100% Americans into those churches which was opposed to labor unions and the left in general. Nevertheless it is strange that such politically reactionary churches should reemerge in strength during the 1970s and on. What is truly appalling is not only their ultra conservative spokespersons but the nature of their audiences. Seemingly sane people blossoming to the touch of faith healers, accepting all their tired hoakum with hosannas and hallelujahs.

**Moral/political themes of Christian fundamentalism**

Although there seems to be no inherent reason why those who have a belief in religious fundamentalism should also be politically conservative, in North America that is largely the case. Listening to the proposed solutions to alleged problems put forward by fundamentalist preachers it often seems we are listening to proposals for totalitarianism with a North American face. Here follows a partial compendium of the views of many fundamentalist churches in America and probably in Canada as well. In no order of importance they are the following:

1. The anti-abortion campaigns for the enforced birthing by all women who become pregnant.

   While concerned that women be denied the right to terminate unwanted pregnancies these crusaders are not especially concerned with the lives of those humans already born. They rarely care that some ten plus million children die each year for lack of food, or clean drinking water or for the most basic medical care. These same 'right to life' crusaders are often vociferous supporters of the endless wars in which America has been involved during the last 60 years. The millions of dead in those wars don't count as much as unborn fetuses.

   It may be that an underlying force in the anti-abortion campaigns is really an opposition to freely available sexuality. Sex is always a powerful force in human relations and Christian morality revolves around keeping it under tight control. This was a form of repression which permeated much of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The discovery and dissemination of effective birth control
techniques shook sexual restrictions to the core. Individuals could finally enjoy the pleasures of sex without the perpetual worries about pregnancy. When birth control measures occasionally proved unreliable individuals had recourse to abortion. Therein probably lies the pathological hatred of fundamentalists to abortion; it freed sexuality from its potential threat, unwanted pregnancy.

The hostility fundamentalists direct against abortion probably has little to do with protecting unborn human life. Fetuses are not human beings, only potential ones, like the thirteen unfertilized ova which women produce every year, all of which are potential humans. Sexuality, so long a basis of morality, is nullified by putting it under human control. People are getting the pleasure without paying the price of pregnancy. It circumvents god's plan. It is ungodly.

2. The suppression of all extra marital sexuality by those opposed to a freer sexuality and are especially opposed to all juvenile sexuality.

When commercial television, always looking for safe yet emotive themes, equated juvenile sexuality with paedophilia, it pushed a hot button among the righteous. They are generally opposed to all sexuality before, after and outside of marriage, which is supposed to last for life. Although this is becoming somewhat rare in the U.S.A.

Today there are effective physical and biochemical contraceptives which accomplish fertility control as abstinence once did, without the psychological costs involved. Many of the religious find this to be unholy and set out to suppress birth control as well as abortion. The Catholic church is still doctrinally opposed to the use of any means which interferes with human conception.

3. Opposition to and suppression of homosexuality.

Legalizing homosexuality has been interpreted by some fundamentalists as legitimizing practices which call for the death penalty in the bible. It allegedly is a mark of the moral degeneracy into which America and the western world have fallen. Male homosexuality appears to weigh the heaviest on such moralists and sodomy is invariably mentioned with wrathful disgust. Some prominent preachers have even claimed that legalizing homosexuality has brought down god's wrath on America and its people. They have claimed that the AIDS epidemic which rages around the world is clearly god's punishment for homosexuality. What of those who acquire AIDS through heterosexual transmission? Well, clearly, sex outside of marriage must be involved, another godly prohibition broken. What will happen when a cure or a preventative is found for AIDS, will god's will then be stymied? Lesbianism has seemingly gotten off with lesser religious denunciation, possibly because women are lesser people in their view.

4. The defense of the family myth means defense of the allegedly traditional patriarchal family, with a husband as the head, the mother staying at home to tend the house and children who are obedient copies of their parents.

Even if we dismiss current feminist horror stories of how family life has always revolved around the oppression of women, we may ask why the family now requires
defense. From what? This theme has become a central feature of born again religiosity in North America. Why does the family require defense? Because of the plague of unorthodox interpersonal arrangements which have arisen and which are less binding than marriage once was. Also because men in such arrangements are often no longer the unchallenged heads of households, as they are clearly intended to be by the bible. Because of this family life is becoming less authoritarian, without a disciplinary figure to set rules. This can only bode ill for the future of our society since it weakens personal rejection of unacceptable acts, thoughts or sentiments.

5. The mandatory teaching of Judeo-Christian religion in public schools.

Mandatory morning school prayers and daily bible reading in school were the case not so long ago. I myself didn't find such rituals as particularly oppressive, they were simply a part of the general authoritarianism which prevailed in school. That they have now been removed from the school curricula nevertheless seems all to the good. However Christian fundamentalists have never accepted the proposition that their beliefs should not receive priority rights in transmission.

The schooling entailed in cultivating 'Christian values' includes a deep rooted opposition to teaching evolution, and in its place presents the creation of the world and all on it by intelligent design, i.e god's design. Possibly the most transparently silly aspect of this outlook is that the world is held to be not more than some ten to twelve thousand years old, as determined in an 18th century biblical dating.

The current surrenders to teaching religion in public schools includes a proposal to provide mandatory instruction about the main beliefs of all the major world religions along with Christianity. This sounds more dangerous and open to the silliest of cultural relativism imaginable. Sticking with a Christian prayer and easily forgettable passages from the bible seems far less intrusive. One can just imagine what grade school teachers will make of mandatory classes on world religions.

6. Religious fundamentalists are usually supporters of more and increasingly repressive laws.

An example of this was their support of the so called 'Three strikes and you're out' law in California by which anyone convicted of three crimes, regardless of how minor, is automatically sentenced to life imprisonment (including an actual case in which the final crime was stealing a slice of pizza pie). Apart from the transparent injustice of such laws, the police and prison society it produses will entail a greatly heightened prison population the costs of which even the most enthusiastic supporters must now be rethinking.

The forces behind such jurisprudence are addicted to punishing others, they are committed to trying and imprisoning people for increasing periods on an increased number of charges for an ever expanding roster of crimes. Possibly the most striking example of this hysteria is the so-called 'War on Drugs' now supplemented by the 'War on Terrorism about which the public is constantly bombarded. The message revolves about how drug use is destroying the moral fibre of America, that those selling and using drugs are sub-humans who should be treated as such. The prohibitions called
for today range from maleficence littering to illicit tobacco smoking to criminally incorrect thought thinking, the later also being forwarded today by once progressive forces in Canada.

7. Support for militarism at home and wars abroad.

Christian and Jewish fundamentalists believe that America and Israel are the only two nations on earth which have the right to correct thought and defend human decency (as determined by themselves). American fundamentalist churches have largely jumped aboard the Israeli bandwagon and have defended their massacres and ongoing oppression as if they were their own. This is a change from the past when Christian fundamentalists were often held to be anti-Semites. Today the Semites under assault are mainly Arabic Semites.

Fundamentalists are typically militant supporters of any war their country is engaged in no matter where or how unjust it is. This is strange position for followers of the 'prince of peace' to hold but they typically believe that America is god's agent on earth and that any wars it is engaged in are to some degree holy. Its soldiers are 'god's warriors', its enemies are minions of Satan opposing the legitimate rulers of the world. All war crimes committed by the US and its allies are invariably legitimate acts in the defense of a 'free world'. Those who oppose American power anywhere in the world are enemies of god as well as of freedom. This is in keeping with the view that American and Israeli imperialism are a part of god's plan.

8. The fundamentalist outlook maintains a fervent opposition to whomever the Great Satan of the day is.

It is somewhat amazing how rapidly and radically changes in 'The Enemy' can take place. For one period it is international Communism seeping through the walls into American living rooms, then Cuban and Latin American guerrillas undermining Hemispheric defense, next the student peace activists undermining American military strength or Black radical nationalists undercutting American democracy and most recently the Satanic agency has been the International Islamic terrorist threat.

The Great Satan can change from one season to the next while the past devils are rapidly forgotten, unless continually resurrected by some special interest group. The same hysterical energy which sustained the hatred for the previous foe is transferred to the new one. All of the Great Satans of the day are accompanied by lesser ones which gives the crusaders considerable leeway in witch sniffing and heresy hunting.

The Great Satan of the day is maligned, its threat to free America is raised and endless personal testimonials offered to the public. These normally are simple variations on the same theme which has been played since the Great Patriotic war of 70 or even a 100 years ago. Nothing is ever learned in these campaigns since the enemy is largely a caricature and learning is not the purpose of such exercises in any event. Only the costuming of the enemy is slightly changed from one period to the next.

9. Many fundamentalists are basically hostile to any meaningful democracy.

This is true despite their constant harping on supporting American democracy. They are opposed to whatever libertarian elements there are in the American
Constitution and in whichever laws have been used to defend liberty. Some of the more extreme fundamentalists openly demand a Christian theocracy in which biblical commandments will be enforced by law and under which non-Christians will hold some secondary status. Rights to hold unpopular views would be dispensed with while opposition to Christian orthodoxy would face legal repression.

Such a policy is seen in their support of demagogic ministers and reactionary political representatives. They backed Ronald Reagan and made demons out of rather mild liberals like Senator Edward Kennedy. Their presidents have stacked the Supreme Court with a collection of political hacks who have defended openly rigged presidential elections, such as occurred in Florida during the year 2000. Fundamentalists and conservatives have supported the wide roster of Homeland Security legislation which virtually canceled most legally supported freedoms in America. Despite endless repetition, it is no longer even nominally true that Americans live under the rule of law.

10. Americanism as a religion is a basic feature of religious fundamentalism.

This outlook has become deeply interwoven with the claims of the religious right. For them America is the greatest nation that has ever existed on the face of the earth. While its police-court-jail legal system requires swifter action and more reliable conviction of those arrested, America is a light unto the world. What more confirmation does one need to understand that God blesses America in any and all conflicts.

Listen to any of the prominent televangelists and you will note how American patriotism and militarism blend easily with their evocations. Undoubtedly some preacher somewhere has discovered that Christ was really an American in spirit. Heaven and Hamburgers too. Hallelujah.

To repeat, what is here termed Christian fundamentalism involves a literal interpretation of the bible, both old and new testaments, and an acceptance of the moral precepts they provide. It is remarkable that a correct formula for understanding the world, the cosmos and all things in it should stem from ancient Israel, such a bloodthirsty and backward society. But that’s what they believe.

One guess about the appeal of Christian fundamentalism for some people is that it is a simple minded way to answer many complex questions without knowing the issues involved or the evidence required for a real answer. "Why is the world the way its, why are animals and humans what they are"? An outline of the history of life on this planet plus a meaningful account of evolutionary forces which shaped them entails both complex and incomplete answers. The changes are statistical and gradual not typological and rapid. It is more fulfilling for some to repeat the 'answers' given in some holy book. With sufficient interpretation the passages of such a book can be made to answer all questions put to it -- even if the responses are essentially non answers. Since such 'answers' are derived from the holy word of god they are unchallengeable. Story finished, book closed, answer given.

Such stories of course cannot provide an answer to those even passingly knowledgeable about the world -- no matter how often doctrinal answers are
repeated. But those fully involved in the entire cornucopia of faith transmitting institutions -- Christian summer camps and weekend church activities, prayer vigils for particular holy causes, Sunday school lessons and a wide range of religious activities filling up an individual's time may leave little opportunity and interest in considering accounts other than those provided by one's church.

It should go without saying that most (at least many) believers in fundamentalist religions can be decent even personally helpful individuals. They probably love their spouse and children and may even be concerned to mitigate some effects of poverty which exist. They may be active in funding palliative care for those who need it, at home and abroad. Many may be paragons of civic virtue, even likeable individuals. Fine. But to the extent that they support the social outlook outlined above they are tinder, ever ready to flare up into the oppressive and dangerous political policies we have considered.

Godly Directions from an Emigre Indian Reactionary

Let us examine a book entitled What's So Great About Christianity? (2007) by an emigre reactionary who sets out to flay atheism and secularists for their subversive dishonesty. Dinesh D'Souza is an East Indian of partly Portuguese extraction who was born in 1961 and emigrated to America from Goa at age 17 in 1978, just in time to be caught up in Ronald Reagan's know-nothing regime. It was then that he rediscovered his commitment to Christianity, wrote a number of books like the one discussed here and steamed off to become the Rishwain Research Scholar at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, a senior right wing think tank.

D'Souza's book can serve as a compact compendium of the political and moral views of the contemporary American Christian right -- he presents both its charges and its fantasy arguments. There are hardly three consecutive pages in which D'Souza does not belabor contemporary atheists, secularists, agnostics and modernists. They have infected the world of the 20th century but are now being challenged and superseded in America. That is his mission.

Throughout the twenty-five chapters of this book there are recurrent attacks on Charles Darwin as the main evil secularist undercutting the message of the bible. D'Souza says that he believes in an evolution which can be squared with biblical accounts, but not with Darwinism, which fails to provide room for the recurrent intervention of god and miracles. Along with Darwin he flays the 'fundamental mistakes' of astronomer and cosmologist Carl Sagan who is repetitively denounced as an atheist. So what, wasn't he a brilliant translator of new astronomic insights into comprehensible English? "No" says D' Souza, he was really the cutting edge of a conspiracy of unbelievers intent on undermining Christian belief. It is remarkable how an East Indian emigre and born-again Christian, one who is basically ignorant of most scientific thought, can dismiss the cosmological discoveries of the past century, treating such views as atheist propaganda.

In general most contemporary cosmologists from Steven Weinberg to Victor Stenger who hold views discordant from D'Souza's reading of the bible are excoriated
for their blindness toward Christian truth. The chutzpah involved is down right funny at times. The utter arrogance of this jumped jack lance corporal.

Throughout his book D'Souza denounces every scientist and writer who holds an atheistic or an agnostic viewpoint. Just a handful who serve as the evil foil for D'Souza's intellect are Carl Sagan, astronomer and educator supreme, Richard Dawkins, a leading evolutionary biologist and writer, Christopher Hitchens, a one time leftist writer and iconoclast, Stephen Weinberg, cosmologist and astrophysicist, Charles Darwin, biologist and original Satan, Thomas Huxley, British autodidact and defender of Darwin, Arthur Miller, American playwright of *The Crucible*, Michael Onfray, American teacher and atheist, the American Civil liberties Union, defender of religion-free public schools, Herman Bondi, astronomer and proponent of the steady state theory. Also Francis Crick, co-discoverer of DNA, Theodosius Dobzhansky, a renowned evolutionary biologist who was actually a believer, Sigmud Freud, psychoanalyst who characterized religion as a persistent childhood myth, as well as Karl Marx, the evil promulgator of a materialist view of world. Also Ernst Mayr, a pioneer evolutionary biologist, Martin Rees, the physicist who isolated the six fundamental physical settings on which matter and life depend, Bertrand Russell, leading British liberal philosopher and atheist throughout the 20th century. As well as a host of others.

D'Souza, like other right wing preachers, is neither knowledgeable about nor comprehends much of the writing he derogates. It is like listening to televangelists mauldering about their pet peeves of the day -- mainly the existence of the 20th and 21st centuries -- with dire warnings about the consequences of not believing in the literal truth of the bible.

It is not feasible to outline all of D'Souzas charges in his rambling book so a few snippets will have to suffice. In chapter 1, “The Twilight of Atheism and the Global Triumph of Christianity”, we hear that Christianity is the most rapidly growing religion in the world today, encompassing increasing numbers of Korean, Chinese, and Latin Americans (who as Catholics, by implication, weren't Christian). We also learn that in the foreseeable future the overwhelming majority of people in the world will be Christian or Islamic, with atheism in full retreat. From his examples this would mean that science will be in retreat as well.

In Chapter 5, “Render unto Caesar: The spiritual basis of limited government”, we learn that Christianity created a rupture between church and state and helped restrict the powers of the state in a host of areas. Really? That is not my understanding of history. It seems rather that throughout history the Christian church was tenaciously supported by the existing states and that this church was mainly concerned with what their rulers wanted.

D'Souza also tells us that Christianity was the basis of all science. That to the extent that Christianity is under attack the bases for science are also under attack. This is a totally fantastic claim in which he tells us that
"Believer and nonbeliever alike should respect Christianity as the movement that created our civilization, we should treasure our Christian inheritance not as an heritage but as a living presence ..." (2007: 45).

There then follows a long list of beneficial things supported by Christianity, one of the most central being the separation of the powers of the state and church, which “as distinct from every other institution on earth permits freedom of the individual”. However in my reading of history Christianity was normally an opponent of human freedom of belief and whenever possible imposed measures against any such freedom.

Chapter 6 contains a sustained diatribe against homosexual and other unnatural sexual practices, telling us that male homosexuality was inherent in classical Greek and Roman life.

“We can admire the great achievements of classical philosophy, drama and statesmanship. But when we rhapsodize about ‘the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome’ we should keep in mind that the sexual practices of these civilizations live on today only in prisons and in the ideology of marginal groups like the North American Man/Boy Love Association.

In the Christian era, pederasty and homosexuality were considered sinful. Instead Christianity exalted heterosexual monogamous love, which would provide the basis for a lasting and exclusive relationship between husband and wife. Those premises were introduced into a society to which they were completely foreign" (2007: 58).

He means that homosexuality was considered sinful by Christian churches who proclaimed a death penalty on all who practiced it.

D'Souza does not know that monogamy is the usual form of marriage in every society in the world even those with other ideal forms. Was monogamy the gift of Christian values, even where there was no Christianity? Social arrangements such as marriages are typically the result of forces which have little to do with religious ideas. The number of spouses, how and between whom marriages are arranged, how durable they are and what the roles of husband, wife and other kinsmen are are all highly variable in different human societies. The belief that there is a single proper relationship between men and women, and that is American Christian marriage, is typical of D'Souza's provincial world view and that of those he is writing for.

In chapter 10, “The Atheist Fable - Reopening the Galileo Case” D'Souza holds that Galileo was simply a follower of an idea which Copernicus had put forward earlier and that Copernicus had claimed that it was only a theory – ie, that the earth and the planets revolve around the sun and not the other way around. Furthermore he tells us that Galileo's discoveries of the speed of falling objects didn't actually accord with the findings of his experiments -- that he used data mainly to advance his theory.
He notes that highly sophisticated instruments are necessary to actually prove his claim. Rather than seeing the brilliance in Galileo's abstraction D'Souza turns it into a petty intellectual scam.

We also hear that the case of Galileo is usually referred to as an example of the church's persecution of scientists. "Atheist writers have taken up this theme with a vengeance ... Some of these manipulators of history are like atheist Carl Sagan, one of the worst exaggerators of the Galileo fable" (2007: 101). Facts into fables and fables into facts, that's the procedure for D'Souza’s religious tract.

In chapter 13 we hear that the late 18th century theologian, Bishop Paley, who proposed the argument from design for the existence of god, was fundamentally correct. While D'Souza allows that evolution does occur it is fundamentally unilineal and all in the direction of the emergence of mankind. He correctly notes that the same genetic materials and processes occur in all living organisms. However he claims that the emergence of life itself is unexplained by evolution, nor are the recurrent 'miracles' which happen through the course of evolution explained. He holds that recurrent explosions of evolutionary divergence and the inherent complexity of organs such as the eye are still unexplained by evolutionary thought. This is where the designing hand of god shows itself. Like Mandrake the Magician.

Much of the chapter is given over to fabricating reasons why Darwin was so mistaken about the mechanism of evolution, for instance that he did not start his research with any idea of natural selection and that there are extensive gaps in the paleontological record (2007: 146-148). In fact D'Souza holds that the newest approaches of 'intelligent design' answer many of the questions by-passed by Darwin and the Darwinian scholars who have ‘kidnapped biology’. So presumably the biology which humans have been learning for more than a century is fundamentally flawed, it doesn't address the purpose of the divine designer.

One should note that the Richard Dawkins, who is portrayed as an ignorant fool by D'Souza, is not primarily a 'writer' but is today one of the leading evolutionary biologists in the English speaking world. Like other revivalist preachers D’Souza is always eager to deflate the views of atheistic egg heads, even when he knows next to nothing about their fields.

In chapter 16 we hear an extended defence of the reality of miracles. D'Souza scores the school of logical positivism as follows:

"Logical positivism thinks that science operates in a verifiable domain of laws and facts, while morality operates in the subjective and unverifiable domain of choices and values. Logical positivism is confident that scientific knowledge is the best kind of knowledge and whatever contradicts the claims of science must be regarded as irritations. These people are all around us today. Many of them are extremely well educated and speak with an air of certitude” (2007: 182).

He holds that much contemporary philosophy is infected with an atheistic arrogance which dismisses the insights of religion and morality. I should hope so.
Does he really wish to suggest that only reactionary bum boys like himself have a handle on acceptable truth. Yes, apparently he does believe that. Those whom he denounces are among the most decent and most honest people around today while his heros are the Ronald Reagans and Richard Nixons of the world.

In short, miracles do occur and belief in them is justified. If I understand him he holds that miracles have the power to transcend physical laws. He also notes that scientific laws are always being changed and amended therefore all past propositions cannot be true. In general D'Souza holds that material explanation may be adequate for material questions but not for moral or spiritual ones. This might be termed the approach of spiritual immaterialism, or a ghost in the bush is worth two in the hand.

Chapter 23 is entitled “Opiate of the Morally Corrupt. Why Unbelief is so Appealing” in which we are told that part of the rationale of those who oppose religion stems from their own moral corruption. (As in all his other themes absolutely no evidence is tendered.) Their opposition to religion is because atheists have bad consciences about their own moral corruption. This, he claims, is the appeal of atheism, not the long history of evil and oppression which permeates most religion. D'Souza's intellectual venomizing is really quite remarkable.

In chapter 24 “The problem of evil. Where is atheism when bad things happen?” D'Souza attempts to validate the correctness of religion by the ameliorative functions it provides its believers. But religions do more than support people through bad times through soporific beliefs. They may also sustain beliefs in maleficent beings who are the cause of bad things happening -- and all the witch hunting which follows. In the course of portraying a beneficent god they typically also make believers fear the wiles of a powerful devil, whose alleged followers on earth are to be rooted out and exterminated. The religious opposition to evil can and for centuries did result in the most despicable crimes loosed in Europe. Christianity as a whole stands convicted of such crimes.

Let us close with a few brief lines from D'Souza on the comforting gift of Christianity for personal loss.

"What I am saying is that atheism seems to have little to offer at a time like this. Consider this manifesto by Richard Dawkins in his book River Out of Eden "the universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference...

Here we see the underlying horror of materialism: everything becomes dark and meaningless. We also see the materialist solution to the problem of evil: evil is not a problem, because evil does not exist. Life in this view is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. And if a crying mother asks what the purpose of it all is, Dawkins and Weinberg have no better an answer than, 'Sorry, there is no purpose for any of it. Life happens and then it stops. That's all there is to it” (2007: 275).
D'Souza holds that atheism offers neither consolation nor understanding in the face of evil and tragedy whereas Christianity offers both, an omnipotent, benign god who permits evil to occur but also promises that an individual may possibly join him in paradise after death if one has performed his/her requisite religious duties in life. If that is all the comfort which religion can provide it is not very much.

However people can and do accept that moral distinctions are not entailed in the universe without everything becoming 'dark and meaningless'. Quite the contrary. Purely human moral guides can be at least as strong as any religious directions. Furthermore it is not science's task to determine how things should operate in the cosmos nor is it religion's task to lie about the world simply because lies may be more palatable than the truth.

What is a total and calculated lie is that atheism accepts the existence of evil in the world without objection and resistance. It does realize that 'evil' is a purely cultural evaluation of human behavior but atheists have been among the first to oppose various forms of oppression by the state and the religious. Indeed, it is people like D'Souza who are the strongest proponents of evil and oppression and of the suppression of anything markedly different from their own narrow beliefs.

In the final chapter, “A foretaste of eternity, How Christianity can change your life” D'Souza expatiates about how the godlessness of modernism has created feelings of isolation among unbelievers, which results in divorce as well as juvenile delinquency and an acceptance of murder and abortion. And from that to an acceptance of the murder of entire peoples. That is a rather strange charge from someone who supports American wars and mass murder everywhere. Atheism allegedly leads to the acceptance of general immorality and of unnatural practices such as homosexuality, genocide, and eating non kosher hot dogs as well as all current evils being denounced by the Christian right.

In general, D'Souza holds that beliefs about evolution and the Big Bang theory of the creation of the universe are simply secular fantasies -- which he denounces along with all those who hold such views. Throughout his book he offers us denunciations of a wide range of scientists and philosophers whom he dismisses in his repulsive manner. In fact he usually doesn't understand the arguments put forward. His opponents are pictured as the bitter fruit of fundamental errors in logic and of their own moral corruption. Those denounced in D'Souza’s book might be added to an honor roll of those under attack by the looney tune right in America. D'Souza himself is simply a bought and paid for hack who might best be shipped back to Goa to empty the church’s collection bowls there. Unfortunately there are thousands more ready to take his place should this occur.
CHAPTER 8

Americanism as a Religion

The triumph of the political and religious right is hardly a novel phenomenon in America, it ruled the scene throughout the 1950s, dominated the 1920s and reemerged in the 1980s. It has marked yet earlier phases in that nation's history. Each forward sweep of neo-conservatism invariably leaves a thick residue of restrictive laws and repressive bodies behind while each step forward of social progress seemingly must begin afresh each time it is taken, usually with little learned from earlier events.

The ideology of 'Americanism' has become a species of religion, one with numerous sects, millions of followers and an influential and powerful network of support. It is part of an ultra conservative nationalism and has become an unexciseable part of the American cultural landscape.

A passage from Rolf Knight's Voyage Through the Midcentury (1988) commenting on the patriotic-religious sentiments dominant in Chicago at the beginning of the 1960s provides a brief overview of the means used to establish conformity to the then accepted shibboleths. This process and its raucous supporters were allied to a series of witch finding investigations which lasted for more than a decade, going into hibernation only with the forces created by the desegregation and the anti Viet Nam war movements in the later 1960s. The following passages relate to Chicago in the early 1960s.

" 'Get the UN Out of the US and the US Out of the UN' was a commonly seen bumper sticker slogan around Chicago at the beginning of the 1960s. 'Keep American Strong -- Fly the Flag' was another, demonstrating that belief in sympathetic magic wasn't dead among the denizens of the Middle West. 'This Is a Republic -- Not a Democracy. Let's Keep It that Way' was a hobby horse of the John Birch Society. There was also a Committee of One Million who were for rooting out the compromisers who had 'lost China' (until it was found again a decade later by Tricky Dick Nixon). 'Don't Buy Polish Hams' was the slogan of a grass roots campaign against 'trading with the enemy' and in support of one hundred percent American hams. The Liberty Lobby urged Americans to 'Let Freedom Ring'. The Young Americans for Freedom, a claque of aspirant William Buckleys and stock jobbing
Cotton Mathers, called for greater legal restraint of the 'dangerous under classes'. 'Support Your Local Police' was their watch word. Crackerbarrel radio hosts reminded their listeners to 'Keep God In Our Schools', presumably feeling that the Almighty had been ejected and required their intercession.

The Holy American Inquisition was still in full voice in the American heartland. The preeminent bible thumper was Billy Graham. He was packing in the yahoos with his Crusades for Christ, damning sin in its sundry, mainly sexual, guises. Graham's evangelical hoakum was comparatively innocuous but there were also others like one Dr. Schwartz, a Southern California evangelist who had parlayed his Anti-Communist Crusade into a nation wide show which Billy Sunday would have envied. Coming up strong out of Oklahoman nativism was the Rev. Billy Hargis with his own Christian Anti-Communist Crusade. The Rev. Hargis was later reduced to appearing in bit roles on the Rev. Pat Robertson's 700 Club medicine shows after the good Oklahoman was charged with buggering some of his young male crusaders. But there were lots of others to take his place. ‘Boob Belt snake oil showmen,’ you say? They had swarms of breathless followers in cities like Chicago.” (1988: 40-44)

There were numerous theologians and preachers active in pandering to American Imperialism as well as leading members of the Catholic hierarchy -- such as television's bishop J. Fulton Sheen and one cardinal Spellman. They and others were prominent spokespersons for the forces of the right in America. It shouldn't have been surprising but it was, the way all fingers of the guiding hand worked in such close coordination.

“‘There were Armed Forces Day parades and Preparedness Weeks. There were Loyalty Day marches in which ethnic organizations jostled to turn out their membership in order to demonstrate their loyalty as True Americans. Daily Pledges of Allegiance to the Flag had been introduced during the Red Scare of the post World War One era and were universal. Now many public school boards instituted compulsory civics courses entitled 'Know Your Enemy.' Among the horrors of totalitarianism they catalogued was the sinister process of 'brain washing', from which the proponents of Americanism were to be safely inoculated.”

More than a thousand public organizations had been unilaterally placed on a list of 'Subversive Organizations' by the Attorney General's office in the early 1950s. They ranged anywhere from mildly liberal to, what in America, counted as 'left wing' organizations. They included peace groups, civil rights organizations involved in desegregation campaigns, organizations such as the National Lawyers
Guild and remnants of organizations such as the Committee to Aid Spanish Republican Refugees. The list included the Industrial Workers of the World and a kaleidoscopic assortment of others. There was no claim that they or their members had broken any law. In fact there was never any specification whatsoever of what 'subversive' actually meant. There were never any specific charges tendered. Indeed, it was categorically forbidden to bring a court case against the Attorney General's Department to have the evidence of an organization's alleged subversive nature presented. That would endanger National Security.

"The American public broadly accepted the pronunciamentos of the Attorney-General and the serried under-bosses of the National Security regime, the likes of whom were revealed in senate investigations two decades later. Americans accepted that J. Edgar Hoover and the other secret police chiefs should be above the law, able to do what they liked, whenever they liked to whomever they disliked with impunity. They accepted that creatures like Senator Dirksen and Senator Eastland and others like them should be able to determine what would and wouldn't be permissible beliefs in America.

Anyone defending the alleged rights of individuals to belong to progressive organizations or the right to espouse currently unpopular views was himself investigated and harassed. Either agents of the F.B.I. or private right-wing groups would roll out their smear tactics, make 'informational visits' to the victim's employer, associates or colleagues -- who might themselves be threatened with investigation unless the offending individual was removed from his job. Those who wouldn't cooperate rendered themselves open to the charge of being 'dupes of front organizations' or of being 'commie symps.' A network of publications eagerly conveyed slanders and rumors about the targeted victims into print."

Knight notes that most American as well as Canadian labor unions went along with this self immolation counterpointed with a little poor mouthing about 'excesses'. Many union leaders even instigated witch hunts among their own membership to weed out 'subversives' lurking there. Although there were honorable exceptions many formerly progressive organizations became vehement witch hunters themselves.

"Security investigation had become a growth industry. There were hundreds of agencies, public and private, investigating the political purity or taint of heresy of other Americans. 'I've got nothing to hide, they can investigate me. Nobody has anything to worry about unless they have something to hide,' was a common response of the Great Crested Boobus Americanus -- a species widely distributed in Canada as well. Anyone objecting to this wholesale expropriation of
what were supposedly fundamental rights was himself under suspicion. The F.B.I. alone, having allegedly investigated some ten million Americans, had a million dossiers in its files of "potential security risks". Americans allowed a cabal of right-wing zealots to determine what ideas could or couldn't be disseminated and who would or wouldn't be accorded their 'constitutional rights'.

This was the public milieu of much of middle America in 1961, some five years after Senator Joseph McCarthy had kicked the bucket. McCarthyism had become institutionalized.” (1998: 141-144)

This outlook became deeply embedded in the responses of many Americans. It was an integral part of a religion called Americanism whose adherents were to be found both among conservatives as well as many others. It was a religion which held that America was the primary god-directed nation on earth and that whatever its flaws it was and from its inception had been engaged in carrying out god's work on earth. There were endless sects in this church whose authority flowed from the combined entertainment/news media and from endless righteously guided churches. Its overriding quality was a feeling of suspicion towards almost everyone and everything - sometimes mixed with an apocalyptic glee.

**America the Beautiful**

There have been some social advances made in recent decades but nothing is lasting and secure. The legalization of abortion, the general acceptance of sexual activity outside of marriage, the legalization of homosexuality, advances in the provision of public health care for many (though hardly all), the partial breakdown of racial segregation and the seeming confirmation of certain civil rights in fact and not just in theory. All these advances were under attack and began to retreat during the Reagan era and during the reign of president George Bush 11.

The former advances have been superseded by the spread of an extended police presence everywhere as well as the steady growth of the American prison population -- some 700,000 prisoners in the late 1960s to well over 2,000,000 today. This does not even include the 6 million Americans who are out on parole, not truly free but under the watch of parole officers who can return their charges to prison for any of a plethora of 'offenses'. Then, following the bombing attack on New York in 2001, the wide ranging 'Homeland Security' laws provided government authorities the powers to override all legal protections and all civil rights once held to be fundamental in America. One can now be secretly arrested, held secretly encommunicado, in perpetuity without any charge having been laid -- for reasons of 'national security'. Who would have believed that the fundamental rights of citizens could have been dispensed so easily and quickly?

Everywhere there are more fenced off 'security areas', more public buildings with guards at the doors inspecting everyone wanting access. 'No trespassing' signs have everywhere become the measure of the day. And most people accept all of this. Past
legal protections have now been overshadowed by the ever broadening powers of a law and order state. Those termed 'Conservatives' in North America offer repression for anything and everything they find personally distasteful. Some would probably like to introduce a quasi-theocracy such as has never yet existed in North America. A generalized anger and obscurantism have tended to hide those truly responsible for economic and social decline -- the decisions made by the major corporations, the major banks and financial speculators as well as the senior government administrators who facilitate the actions of the powerful. Everyone who has managed to acquire a home, who holds moderate savings somewhere, who believes he or she has a secure income, they all feel they are part of the American middle class as opposed to the ner-do-wells they believe they see everywhere. They believe they are the true America. However, many probably do realize just how tenuous their grip on a modest prosperity is.

Our era is characterized by the expansion of laws which make virtually everything one does or says open to prosecution. It has turned 'American democracy' into something which was once decried as 'European authoritarianism'. This is the nation which endlessly proclaims that it saved the world from unAmerican fascism some seventy years ago and as Communist totalitarianism in the following era. A nation which claims to defend freedom everywhere but has instead helped establish a shifting archipelago of right-wing regimes around the world during our lifetime. A substantial number of Americans are simply not a part of the modern world. One doesn't have to go to Jonestown, Guyana or to Waco, Texas to find them. There are many people out there who are basically not playing with a full deck. Tens of millions of people are intellectually living in the 12th century even as they manipulate computer programs.

The religious right had lain mordant during the 1960s and 1970s until the 1980s. Protestant fundamentalists acted as if politics were tainted with an excessive concern for the existing world which as born again Christians they should stand aloof from. But those running Ronald Reagan's presidential campaign were able to mobilize these people and elect him as their champion. Those who elected him have largely called the shots for the last thirty years. Reagan was almost a caricature of a fundamentalist president in office. He treated all those who disagreed with him with avuncular contempt and larded his statements with repetitions of his past Hollywood movie maxims. Finally it became increasingly clear that the president of the United States of America was rapidly descending into the unreachable world of senile dementia. Who knows what he really knew and thought about events in this world -- he was seemingly a dedicated Christian expecting the apocalypse in the foreseeable future. And after him came the Bushes, Senior and Junior, with smiling Billy Clinton thrown in for good measure. While the real incomes and the jobs of working Americans disappeared down a thousand rat holes professional explainers pontificated how in the new reality everyone (meaning everyone else) must accustom themselves to less. What has all this have to do with religion and atheism? Many religious Americans sniffed around looking for scapegoats to blame such changes on.
Not only has the fundamentalist vote been mobilized but their numbers seem to be steadily increasing. The believers range from seemingly decent people to raving fanatics determined to impose their own fantasies on all others in America, which they feel is in need of being redeemed. Belief in the literal interpretation of the bible allegedly ensnares something like 40 per cent of the American population, or circa 120+ million people. Plus an equal number of believers who take a somewhat less literal interpretation of the bible as a guide to life. And not a much smaller percentage in Canada. They are not troubled by the internal contradictions, the implausibility and down-right childishness of much of the bible. Nor are they put off by its bloodlust and the oppressive acts called forth from its followers. It is a scary thought that maxims from the bible are the way many people view the world around them. It wouldn't matter so much if they were the inhabitants of some region in central Africa but America is still the most powerful state in the world with certainly the largest stockpile of nuclear arms today. And this power is often in the hands of seemingly mad fantasists.

Currently American fundamentalists are involved in attacking the basis of modern thought, the results of what has been learned in the last 200 years. A recent (March 20, 2011) ad on Canadian television asked, "What has science and evolution to say about the marvellous structure of the heavens, what does it tell us about the creation of life and the complexity of the most advanced animal on earth? The bible contains clear answers to all of these questions." Actually the bible contains nothing on these topics at all. It doesn't even recognize that evolutionary processes exist. It has nothing useful to say about the structure of the universe or the natural processes existing on earth. It is the text of a bunch of sheep herding pastoralists from the backlands of the middle east some two to three thousand years ago.

It tells us that all things on earth and in the cosmos arose from a single divine creation, the act of an omnipotent, omniscient, ever present and benign god. All the intricacies and complexities, all the expanding understandings of the sciences are cast aside for the ultimate of non answers. 'How did something come about? Well because it was the divine will of god who made it so. Finished. Nothing more you need to know. This may be the way distracted parents answer children who question them about things that they, the parents, do not know or are too weary to discuss. But it surely can't stand as an answer for intelligent adults. The bible is a collection of chauvinistic folk tales and the warnings of raving prophets, the tales of a backward people from a backward region of the world some two to three thousand years ago. It is not surprising that it has nothing meaningful to say about the cosmos or about those processes which have been discovered since the word of the true god was revealed. It has nothing to say about most of what we know today.

What seems highly improbable in a universe designed by an all knowing god is the extraordinary waste involved. If the purpose was to create a world for a species cast in god's image then the overwhelming majority of the universe is unnecessary and uncalled for. If the creator's purpose was to establish a home for living creatures then black holes, super massive stars which explode, star dust in stupendous stellar oceans, inconceivable amounts of sub atomic particles zipping through the universe at
near the speed of light, interminably vast arrays of planets on which life cannot exist and much else that is all unnecessary. Only the tiniest fraction of this matter is capable of sustaining life in any form. Why would an all-knowing entity, an all-powerful god, use only an infinitesimal part of the universe for the maintenance of creatures created in his image? Were they an afterthought? Did he use evolution and natural selection as the mechanism to achieve his ends? Why should he wait around for 13.5 billion years before these creatures arrive at near human status who can worship him? Was that really the reason he created mankind, to have creatures with free will who would worship him?

The standard 'answer' is that god and his works are ultimately unknowable. Which is no answer at all. If he is unknowable how can humans possibly know what he intends or demands? Oh, he told us of his wishes through the agency of holy prophets and divine revelations. But who is to say the prophets understood what was imparted to them, they were all rather crazed individuals. Moreover they vary in what they claim god has divulged to them.

Any straight forward reading of the doings of god in the bible portrays an entity who is petty, vainglorious and not particularly admirable. He is self centered and he is vengeful -- punishing his people, the Jews, while he exterminates others. He directs his followers to carry out genocide again and again. For an omniscient entity he is sometimes rather simple minded while at other times he is a divine sadist, at one point drowning almost everyone on the face of the earth because he didn't like the way some were behaving. He is deeply offended by the most minor peccadillos committed by 'his people' and he deems that anything negative said about him is a mortal sin. This is the alleged creator of the universe and the one who allegedly established the moral code for the world to live by. I'm glad that no such entity exists because if he did it would demand eternal resistance.

It seems to me that the god who allegedly created man didn't really know what he was doing, didn't fully understand what giving humans the ability to think and reason would entail. Free will, right? Humans have the ability to choose what to believe and what to support but unless they choose from the very narrow range of acceptable responses they will wind up in hell being tormented eternally. Which god has also created just for that purpose.

How did earlier naturalist-believers make sense of this mass of fantasy and provincialness? Nineteenth century biblical commentators were rife with suggestions of how miracles were to be refashioned in such a way that they just might have happened naturally. They held that Jesus Christ was not simply a creation of his later followers and that the miracle tales about him were simply human wish fulfillment. The yet earlier Christians were often miracle-prone individuals with little grasp on reality at the best of times. They were given to discovering miracles everywhere in almost everything.

Early Christianity basked in the glow of all variety of impossibilities. The last apostle of the New Testament, Saint John the Divine, was clearly insane. His 'Revelations', the final chapter in the bible, are the ravings of a full blown psychotic. It is not surprising that present day religious psychotics find him appealing. The
church and early Christianity moved in a world suffused by supernatural events all around it. Christianity was marked by mass fantasies and the deep gullibility of its believers.

The Devil has been a central feature of Christianity from its inception. While Satan is present in the old testament he only becomes central in the later theology of Christianity. He effectively became a second, an evil and insubordinate, god. Alleged allegiances to the devil were used to explain actions which the church wished to suppress. Hunting adherents of the devil often took on a momentum of its own, the Devil became the source of evil in the world -- not poverty or oppression or anything else in the real world.
CHAPTER 9

Reaction and Oppression in Other World Religions

It will be evident that the following brief accounts are in no way an overview of the religions dealt with. Considering the rejection here tendered to Christianity I should make it perfectly clear that the other world religions should provoke this same response. As things stand an atheist is safer and more secure in a predominantly Christian nation than in an Islamic or Hindu one. Nor would I find much comfort in the prospect of living in a nation committed to Judaism.

It may seem that this overview of other religions does not revolve sufficiently around the basic beliefs and 'values' transmitted by them and is more historical than theological. This is true but accounts similar to the format used here are to be found in scholarly surveys such as Willard Oxtoby (ed.) two volume World Religions. The Western Tradition and The Eastern Tradition (2002), as well as many others.

Eric Hobsbaum, in The Age Of Extremes. A history of the world, 1914-1991 notes that,

"Fundamentalist religion as a major force of successful mass mobilization belongs to the last decades of the twentieth century, which has witnessed a bizarre return to fashion among some intellectuals of what their educated grand-parents would have described as 'superstition and barbarism'.

"Conversely, the ideologies, the programmes, even the methods and forms of political organization which inspired the emancipation of the dependent countries from dependency, backward societies from backwardness, were Western: liberal, socialist, communist and/or nationalist, secularist and suspicious of clericalism" (1996: 202).

Strangely Hobsbaum's earlier historical accounts are generally empty of any meaningful treatment of religion. One wonders why that is so. If he feels that religious beliefs are mainly superstructural reflections of the underlying economic-social ones he is surely correct. However what the linkages between religion and everyday life are have not really been dealt with. The question remains, 'Why are the emerging social forces we have recently witnessed so different from what we experienced in the past?' Or are they truly different? What has given religion almost everywhere such powers of resuscitation? 'Abysmal ignorance' hardly seems a satisfactory answer.
The following comments about aspects of the major world religions are necessarily extremely cursory. Some will find them to be shallow and uninformed. But is what is said here basically inaccurate? The central beliefs of these religions are rather convoluted. Some individuals spend a lifetime studying the lessons and contradictory interpretations contained in a religion and near the end of their life remain as uncertain as when they first started.

An overview to the world religions is a virtually impossible task. They are all belief systems with long histories of accretion and change despite their claims of changelessness. All contain differing, often conflicting, interpretations of what is expected of believers. They are all accompanied by measureless amounts of commentary, contentious propositions and varying emphases about how their beliefs are to be applied. They are all mixtures of specious claims, moral commandments, modified folk sayings and great dollops of incomprehensible mysticism as well as gobbets of sheer silliness.

Hundreds of millions of people have devoted large portions of their lives in attempting to understand the 'true nature' of particular religions, often coming to the conclusion that claims about god and the sacred are ultimately unanswerable. The following are merely a few comments on some oppressive elements entailed in religions other than Christianity. Admittedly this is a negative way to approach the topic but in my estimation these other religions are not one iota better or more humane than Christianity. A poor prognosis.

One may reject the claim that Christianity or Islam, Judaism, Hinduism or Buddhism are truly the bases of the societies which maintain them. The view held here is that religions in general mirror the central features of the society they emerged from and are a part of. In other words religious beliefs are largely a reflection of the society they are a part of, not the other way around.

**European Judaism**

Judaism was one of the first monotheistic religions to emerge in the world -- a much cited but very dubious distinction. Originally Judaism did not claim that there were no other gods or spiritual entities in the world but only that Yahweh was the single god that Jews must worship. But other nations within their periphery did well enough without any monotheist religion. There is no inherent reason why a small population of warlike sheep and goat herders should create or borrow a single god to worship. It is quite atypical.

Actually it seems incorrect to characterize Judaism, Christianity and Islam as monotheistic, they in fact are mainly dualistic religions, with a 'good' god and an 'evil' one (the devil) competing for followers. In Christianity the good god is seemingly unknowable and his response to human action is largely unpredictable, except in retrospect.

Initially the Jewish god was a rather bloody one, demanding regular blood sacrifices and directing his followers in the widespread wars and genocide they perpetrated. Polytheistic religions can also be pretty bloodthirsty but I don't believe that the pantheon of Greek 'pagan' gods -- Demeter, Diana, Zeus, Apollo and all the
rest -- demanded as many living sacrifices as did this Jewish god. It has always puzzled me why the holy festivals of and belief in the 'pagan' gods should have been given up to worship a single Jewish god whom no one could see or hear or feel. Was it the promise of an afterlife which drew in the new adherents, was it the threat of coming hell fire for non-Christians? One simple answer is that Christianity was often imposed by force and the threat thereof.

The Jewish god like the Christian one is forever finding excuses ('reasons') for why things go wrong for his adherents. There is invariably some failing, some breaking of taboos or proscriptions by his adherents which has drawn his curse down upon them. It never fails, in explanations made in retrospect. He is the god who people are to praise when the annual rains fall but are not to question when those rains fail and famine stalks the land. Even if one believes in the existence of supernatural beings a single, benign, all knowing and all powerful god in the universe makes no sense whatsoever.

For centuries Jewish ghetto society in historic Europe and elsewhere were infested with miracle working rabbis who could divine the intent and actions of a multitude of supernatural forces but could do nothing at all to protect their people from cholera or the multitude of other infectious diseases which beset them. Their expertise was in the spiritual world not in the material one, said many. Some rabbis especially knowledgeable in the Kabbalah (a mystical study which allegedly revealed the mechanisms of the supernatural) could supposedly even produce wine from the walls of houses -- but I doubt that it was very good wine. In any case they were all given to endless prayer and to praising god, which really improved conditions a lot.

It is a mistake to visualize those Jewish ghettos as urban or rural slums -- they were simply the locale where all/most Jews lived, both the wealthy and the poor, the criminal and the holy. Buildings and housing were squeezed into usually close quarters which sometimes gave them an urban quality. The ghettos operated under their own administration, operated under their own laws, collected their own taxes and maintained their own social hierarchy. The successful rabbis along with the more prosperous merchants and contractors of goods and labor acted as the ruling class of their particular communities. To see this in predominantly religious terms is a serious misreading of the social facts. The Jewish religious leaders while educated in and disputational about their own beliefs were often part of the strata which both led and exploited their own community. Supposedly they normally did so with the support of many of the exploited themselves.

Supernatural happenings were the order of the day and could be taken to explain everything and anything: a plague, a drought and famine, a depression, a surfeit of cheap grain and cattle, the incursion of external forces. Historically most of the much touted Jewish learning revolved around knowing, being able to explicate and debate about nonexistent forces and the intervention of an equally nonexistent god.

Religious study of the Torah (The Law) and other sacred texts was often a full time occupation of many Jewish men, although probably never as general as portrayed in novels like those of Isaac B. Singer. As with other populations the majority of Jewish men (and often women) had to work in order to earn a living. The
constant, repetitive memorization of holy text and endless commentary was not something many had time for or probably interest in. Allegedly Orthodox Judaism maintains a code of more that six hundred prohibitions and actions one was required to do and not do. No doubt these all had multiple interpretations and endless commentary attached so the list was rather extensive. Of course these religious prohibitions are as nothing compared to the fullness of laws existent in a modern secular society, which run into the tens of thousands of laws, most of which neither the general public nor in many cases even the judges themselves know.*

* During the 1970's a Royal Commission composed of a large body of senior judges and lawyers undertook to establish how many laws existed in Canada with an eye toward streamlining and removing many of them. After twelve years of investigation they could not even come to a determination of how many laws existed let alone evaluate their nature or suggest which should be removed. They guessed that possibly fifty to sixty thousand laws then existed in Canada.

Despite claims of special Jewish suffering and exclusion from the broader national societies of which they were a part it is surely true that Jewish shopkeepers, contractors, and money lenders -- and indeed many in the Jewish population -- were better off, usually far better off, than the peasantry and landless workers among whom they operated. And as for social exclusion, who could have been more exclusionary than the Jews themselves with their contempt for non-Jews. Food and purity rituals and other restrictions blocked close contact with non-Jews, while marriage requirements barred any mingling with others.

Any Jew tempted to take a wife or a husband from the non-Jewish population was deemed to have died and all further contact with them was forbidden, unless the spouse had first converted to and been accepted into Judaism. Among those excluding Jews from participating in the broader national society were, first and foremost, the Jews themselves. There were more than enough restrictions to keep most Jews separate from those they lived among. This began to change in western Europe during the French revolution which overthrew the legal restrictions on Jewish entry into broader society but social isolation generally remained in force in eastern Europe until the end of the nineteenth century.

Current commentators on the Jewish past denigrate all those who point to past Jewish exploiters. Of course Jews were hardly the only ones engaged in exploitation but does that let Jewish ones off the hook? Should we refrain from noting those who thrive on the lives and labour of others and who treated peasants and workers with utter, contempt if not worse? I don't think so.

There must have been a portion of the Jewish population who owned nothing and had to regularly work to barely sustain themselves -- those who had no stores or shops, who did not contract the labor of others, who were not engaged in profitable trading or money lending. In Poland, Russia, Rumania and in Austro-Hungary by the mid nineteenth century Jewish workers probably comprised a majority of that population and some began to challenge the decisions of their Jewish
leaders/spokesmen. Whether they emigrated to America or stayed at home some became supporters of the early socialist movements along with millions of non-Jews.

Another widely held 'truth' is that throughout the Jews' long 'exile' they suffered hostility and pogroms almost everywhere from almost everyone. But Jews were very rarely peasants or serfs anywhere. Those who weren't merchants were mainly craftsmen or sometimes laborers for contractors of goods and services. There also were some engaged as rent collectors for large landlords. They were never as badly off as the peasantry among whom they lived.

Nor were Jews usually a target of assaults launched by rulers against rebellious peasants. 'Internal crusades' against a rebellious peasantry sometimes counted their victims in multiple thousands whereas the casualties of pogroms numbered in the dozens. Furthermore, practicing Jews were not the targets in Catholic inquisitions. By definition they were not believers in Christianity and therefore not liable to charges of heresy.

In other matters, it is today common for claimants of Jewish contributions to the modern world to present a long string of (unrecognized) Jewish inventors who allegedly discovered, proposed, explicated and delineated most of the technological and scientific insights we have today. In such accounts there is invariably a hidden Jewish contributor to almost every scientific advance made in the western world over the previous three centuries. This seems rather suspicious to me. What of the inventions and industrial advances which emanated from America a century before any significant numbers of Jews landed there? Were all these inventions based on the discoveries or stolen ideas of Jews?

For good measure some enthusiasts claim most of the initial explorations and geographic discoveries were due to hidden Jewish venturers. Possibly the best known example is the claim that Christopher Columbus was a secret Italian Jew searching for a new land to which Spanish Jews facing expulsion could flee. And he found it -- America. No less an authority than Simon Wiesenthal has advanced that claim in book form (Sails of Hope). Not surprisingly he does not mention the enslavement and destruction of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean which Columbus initiated. More than that he claims that Jews had already discovered North America much earlier and comprised a component of the Native people in the Carolinas -- supported by the most ludicrous of 'evidence'. Similar claims suggest that Jewish traders had first 'discovered' China, India, parts of Africa as well as all of the middle east and played a role in their emerging civilizations. They allegedly also helped establish the first cities in Spain, Germany, Poland and throughout much of eastern Europe. One wonders if comparable 'evidence' was used in Wiesenthal's life long hunt for nazi war criminals.

The congregations of religious Jews are divided between the Orthodox, Conservative and the Reform groupings, plus a number of the ultra-orthodox and Hassidim who seal themselves off from the non-Jewish world. In the last forty years most of the Jewish denominations have shifted to the political right, the orthodox and ultra orthodox tend to dismiss Reform Jews (who they hold not to be true Jews). But
since they comprise the majority of Jews in America there is, as yet, nothing much
the orthodox can do about it. But in Israel the orthodox, with the support of a supine
legislature, have imposed many of orthodoxy's religious laws and restrictions on to
the nation as a whole.

What follows may appear to have been fabricated but I assure you that Reb Meir
Kahane did advance the views noted here, either in his own words or in the seven or
eight books he wrote. Here are some of the things he proposed.

First of all he held that only a small minority of Jews in the world today can
legitimately call themselves Jews. According to a clear reading of the orthodox law
only those married by orthodox rabbis have a legal marriage and those born of
illegitimate marriages are forever of a status of 'bastard', which eternally places them
and their descendants in a condition like Indian outcastes, with no rights in the Jewish
community at all. They are forever tainted with moral impurity which bars them from
ever holding any position in Judaism. That status is inherited by their offspring in
perpetuity. It is a category which includes the great majority of American Jews and
probably those elsewhere in the world. By orthodox law they should have no rights in
making any decisions effecting Jews, in Israel or abroad. Their financial contributions
however are acceptable.

The status of children born of a Jewish father and a non-Jewish mother is that they
are forever non-Jews, unless the wife has converted to Jewish orthodoxy before the
birth of the child. The offspring of a Jewish woman and a non-Jewish husband is also
that they are 'bastards' since their parents could not be legitimately married by
orthodox law. This is a status that is eternal and which devolves on all their
descendants in perpetuity. So Christopher Hitchens, if his mother really was Jewish,
would have been a bastard by orthodox Jewish law, as would have been all his
descendants. Moreover, a legitimate divorce can only proceed through the decisions
of an orthodox rabbinical court and divorces obtained through any other means (such
as through civil proceedings) are totally invalid -- the wife and husband remain
legally wed with all the burdens entailed. Two of the few legitimate reasons for a
divorce are open abandonment by a spouse or unwillingness/inability to fulfill the
sexual functions of marriage, to conceive and bear children.

There are a host of 'purity' laws held by the orthodox, such as requiring separate
sets of pots and dishes to cook and serve milk and meat dishes -- which must never be
mingled. Routinely cleansing items tainted with the inappropriate food is costly and
time consuming. One wonders how it could have been sustained originally by the
poor in Hebrew society. Possibly these proscriptions applied only to Jewish priests
originally.

In addition there are dietary prohibitions not only against eating pork but also
excluding many sea foods. There are specifications on what quarters of an animal are
permissible to eat from acceptable food animals, usually the forequarters. There are
stringent stipulations that all animal slaughter be done by trained religious specialists
otherwise the meat will be traif (impure), tainted. There is a tangled nest of
proscriptions about how food is to be handled which may have led individuals into
becoming vegetarians.
Prayer and ongoing religious learning are central facets of orthodox Jewish life -- at least for males. The orthodox typically are either self-employed or work for other orthodox businesses. This facilitates keeping their Sabbath day holy, doing nothing at all except praying, reading holy texts and reflecting on them. It runs from Friday nightfall through Saturday sundown. Prayers are said in small gatherings of men or in sexually segregated synagogues. Separation of the sexes is basic in orthodox Judaism, with women officially holding a secondary status in public. In reality however, there must be a wide range of latitude in this matter as some orthodox men spent much of their time in religious study so their wives had to oversee the day to day operations of a store. Both men and women are, naturally, forbidden the wearing of any sexually suggestive clothing. In any case married orthodox women are not supposed to be seen outside their homes or their own community.

The other major division of the Jewish population is between the Ashkenasi, the Yiddish speaking members of Central and Eastern Europe, and the Shephardic speakers of Ladino, initially in Spain but now mainly in North Africa and the former domains of the Turkish empire. These two divisions of the Jewish population had quite different histories of contact with Islamic society and developed along different lines. Those who emigrated to Israel came to form two distinct and to some degree hostile sections of that country, the Sephardic tending to be members of the Israeli working class and, at present, among the more reactionary elements of that society.

Some additional comments on Jewish history can here be found in the chapter dealing with the Old Testament.

Zionism and Israel

Israel or Palestine initially was a small European colony taken from the Turks at the end of World War One. Over the last sixty-five years it has evolved into being possibly the third greatest military power in the world, with vast stocks of American arms and its own large arsenal of nuclear weapons. It has forged a seemingly unbreakable bond with American Judaism, who comprise the most powerful lobby in that country today. Over the last sixty-five years Israel has become a middle eastern South Africa with an international influence vastly greater than Afrikaners ever had.

Although they present themselves as a perpetually threatened enclave of western civilization, facing the fanatic hostility of the surrounding peoples, Israel has become a perpetually aggressive settler state. They have been engaged in five major wars against their neighbors as well as decades long campaigns of bombing and military attacks on their neighbors. This as earned them the enthusiastic support among born-again American Christians who apparently see Zionism as the affirmation of militant Christianity.

The western culture of the immigrant population in Israel is seemingly waning. Among those raised in Israel Israeli nationalism has become the overwhelmingly dominant theme. A large proportion of its citizens seem to be racists, chauvinists and confident militarists with the backing of their like-minded compatriots abroad. They see themselves as a perpetually sinned against and invariably beleaguered people who apparently feel that most of humanity are either potential or actual anti-semites who
have shown insufficient vigor in defending Jews and Jewish interests in the past. In their view all must be brought to recognize that everyone's first duty must be to support the righteous Jewish 'remnant'.

In Israel the religious right invariably obtains some ten percent of the national vote, placing it in the position of being the king maker in a politically divided parliament. They invariably hold cabinet positions in any government of the right or 'left', they have imposed Sabbath day restrictions on everyone. They demand and have gotten exclusive control over legitimating marriages. They largely determine who can and who can't emigrate to Israel through the 'right of return' law by determining who is and isn't a Jew. Reform Jews are sometimes blocked in becoming Israelis. The religious right also have their own strong arm gangs circulating around Jerusalem investigating any perceived unJewish behavior in dress, thought or deed. Some of their supporters, like the Gush Emunim, have been prominent in murderous attempts to drive out Palestinians from what little remains of their homeland. All that and more is in fulfillment of god's plan for the Jews.

The Jewish right has cloaked itself in religiosity as well as donning the cloak of the most sinned against people in the world. There are many Jewish extremists in America, such as those once gathered around the Rabbi Meir Kahane, who repeatedly claimed in writing that virtually everyone in the world is to some degree anti-semitic and the less that Jews had to do with them the better. Kahane held that only a strictly enforced orthodox Judaism could preserve the Jewish people from assimilation and destruction. However if one followed his views it would reduce the number of legitimate Jews in the world to a small fraction of the current number. The great majority would be 'bastards' with no rights whatsoever among 'true' Jews.

The holocaust industry, with its witch sniffing and heresy hunting, has intruded itself into many current concerns. It is often fronted by rabbis but their interests are less religious than the politics of a rabid ethnic nationalism. For the past forty years their campaign has been to refurbish the memory of and pay homage to victims of the Jewish holocaust But their main interest revolves around Jewish political power and has little to do with any commitment to social justice.

The resurrection of Holocaust claims has become a central theme among organized Jewry today. Those targeted involve all those who did not 'save' European Jewry during the Holocaust, which the Holocaust revivalists have convinced most Americans was the greatest evil ever committed by humans. The Holocaust allegedly places virtually everybody in perpetual debt to the Jewish survivors and their descendants, who have grown to become millions.

Their claims include the following -- Jews are and have always been the most discriminated against and threatened people on the face of the earth. This is a remarkable claim to make in America with its long history of Black slavery and genocidal Indian wars. According to nationalist Jews, the Holocaust of world war 2 was a crime without parallel in human history, even if only ten percent of the war dead were Jews. All persons must accept that the Holocaust be actively remembered and honored by everyone. All the non-Jews who died during world war 2 did not die the same deaths as Jews did, they did not suffer the same pain and certainly do not
count as much as do the Jewish dead. Indeed for many Jewish moralists the only dead who ever do count are the Jewish dead.

It has been noted by some commentators that from 10 to 12 million children and others die each year, world wide, as a result of malnutrition and easily preventable diseases (Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 1999: 255). Possibly that is an anti-semitic claim since it suggests that the lives of impoverished third world people are in some way comparable to the 'six million' Jews who died during the course of world war 2. Which is self evidently ludicrous.

The currently correct view is to hold that the Jews in the Holocaust were murdered simply because they were Jews and not because they were poor or because they were the opponents of some regime. That makes all the difference in why the Jewish dead are forever holy while the others are simply recurrent human losses, of no moral consequence. If you object to this proposition you are a denier of the moral lessons dispensed by Holocaust revivalists.

Holocaust remembrances emerged shortly after the 1967 Israeli military victory over its combined neighbors. That victory raised the Jewish state's military prominence in the following years, even as it established a brutal version of South African apartheid. During the 1973 war with Egypt organized Jewry in North America demonstrated total support for Israeli militarism. This was nine years before the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the decade long military repression of its Palestinian population. Such Israeli militarism was partly obscured by the emergence of the Holocaust Memorial industry -- a remarkably well funded and organized collection of performance activities which include holocaust school curricula, holocaust movies and theatricals, travelling holocaust museum collections, visits to holocaust pilgrimage sites like Auschwitz and a virtually endless array of holocaust memorial books and talks. This is furthered by lawyers and activists investigating those insufficiently supportive of Jewish demands. The Holocaust has become a religion for many Jews, a religion of shabby profiteering, self adulation, and media geared witch hunting.

There undoubtedly are both religious and non-religious Jews who do not support the militarist-chauvinist nature of the Israeli state, although they are not very visible. People like the courageous Israel Shahak, himself a survivor of the Nazi death camps. But it seems that for most Israelis the Palestinians are like the 'natives' in earlier settler colonies. The lackadaisical killings and maimings of Palestinian children by the hundreds and ultimately the thousands bespeak the murderous nature of an increasingly murderous people. The full Israeli support of the Lebanese fascists (the Phalange) who carried out the extermination of over a thousand Palestinian refugees huddling in their Beirut refugee camps is the main face of Zionism today. It befouls everyone who has anything to do with it.

Part of the irony involved revolves around the fact that at least part of the indigenous Palestinian population are probably the Islamicized descendants of the earlier Jews and Christians of that region. While the immigrant Zionist population are people descended, at least partially, from German, Polish and Russian and others among whom diaspora Jews lived for so long. If Jewishness runs in the blood, as it is
again fashionable to believe, then it is the Palestinians who are the true Jews while the others are mainly Judaized European settlers.

From its inception Israel has warred against everyone on its periphery and has dispossessed, if not expelled, most of its Palestinian population. This is accompanied by a world wide propaganda campaign which holds that the recently arrived Jews are the true proprietors of Palestine while the people who had lived there for two thousand years are the cast-off litter of neighboring societies who have no rights in the land of their birth.

The seizure of the remaining lands of Palestine occurred following 1967, when Israel once again attacked its neighboring states. It was following this predatory war that support for Israel mushroomed among North American Jews. That may be the ultimate denouement of 2,500 years of Jewish history, the establishment and support for a reactionary middle eastern police state.

After the 1973 Israel-Egyptian war Jews throughout North America and elsewhere could not do enough to support Israel and its rightist government under Menachem Begin. The great majority of Jewish organizations in North American became supporters of Israel as well as disseminators of stories about how the goyim had failed to protect the Jews during the Holocaust.

To ask why 'the goyim' should have saved the Jews rather than protect themselves and their own against fascism is held to be blatantly anti-Semitic. Threats and trials of anyone chargeable with 'Holocaust diminution' dominated the news throughout the 1980s and 1990s. It became deeply offensive (possibly illegal in Canada) to ask where were the Jews who hid or defended Palestinians under attack by racist governments in Israel? One might ask “Didn't the good Jews just stand aside and 'abandon' those under attack?” What about the Jewish ‘failure to rescue’ other victims during the second world war or those under attack today by Jewish militarism?

Honoring, memorializing, and teaching highly skewed versions of the Holocaust has become a de facto religion. An American-Jewish religion which has its priests and its holy pilgrimage sites, its holy texts and memorial meetings, as well as its dedicated followers.

The current centrality of the Holocaust has become the main feature of Judaism. At least in so far as it directs the attitudes of Jews toward others. 'The Holocaust' has become the central 'religious' feature of Judaism in the world today.

Islamic fundamentalism

Mohammed lived from c. 570 to 632 A.D. He was born into a poor family and became a tent maker for much of his working life. He received the word of God in his middle age which told him to take down dictation from an angel of god's final orders for humanity. Mohammed could not write so he had a scribe take down notes of his revelations shortly after they occurred. Ten years of these revelations are transcribed as the Koran. In such cases the question always should be not whether individuals receive messages from god but why growing numbers of other people believe the prophet.
Mohammed ran into difficulties with the ruling families of Mecca for a number of reasons, one of which was his dislike of the homage given the Kabah (a large meteorite in Mecca which was an object of religious pilgrimage for polytheists in the region). These pilgrims brought in considerable money to the Meccan merchants who were aggrieved to find their income threatened. So Mohammed had to flee to the neighboring city of Medina for many years, where he established a following and finally returned to Mecca at the head of a conquering army. Mecca became the center for his preaching and the conversion of Arabians to Islam.

After his death Mohammed was followed by the Four Righteously Guided Caliphs over a period of 12 years, until the emergence of Ali, Mohammad's son-in-law. Since Mohammed had no male children Ali was his closest male relative and he ruled the Islamic realm from 656 to 661 A.D. when he was assassinated by a religious fanatic.

Between 632 and 680 Islam conquered a large portion of the Middle East with armies which usually were not as large as nor armed better than their opponents, largely Byzantine Christian forces. By 638 Damascus, the major city in the region was already under the control of Muslim Ummayid rulers. Jerusalem had already been taken some years earlier. There does not seem to have been the mass killings associated with these conquests which distinguished them from the conquests of later Christian crusaders.

The initial Muslim conquests occurred with explosive rapidity. Between the 630s and 730s they seized all of the middle east from south eastern Anatolia and Iran to Egypt and North Africa, as well as the larger part of Spain. They also penetrated some regions of Central Asia and occupied Sicily and districts of the Italian coast somewhat later. They did not penetrate Southern Asia for many centuries but some Muslims reached China and India to trade in the following centuries. They apparently did not initially convert the local populations and the spread of Islam in Indonesia and South East Asia was comparatively late. Indonesia remained an abode of traditional folk religions in a few cases mixed with Hinduism. Today Indonesia is largely Muslim.

Mohammed's son-in-law Ali held that the critical connection between Mohammed and the later leaders of Islam flowed through him and his descendants. He was the husband of Fatimah, Mohammad's daughter. Ali was briefly the fifth Caliph of all Muslims after the assassination of the fourth of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. He became involved in a struggle with the Arabian conquerors of Damascus and was murdered by a Muslim assassin in 661 A.D.

It was Ali's grandson, Husyan, who attempted to wrest the Muslim leadership from the then ruling Ummayid family but was killed along with his entire family in 680 in the battle of Karbala in southern Iraq on the Tenth of Muharram, the tenth day of the Islamic year. This is today the major day of religious atonement for Shia Muslims and is accompanied by public demonstrations of wailing and self imposed whippings which draw blood. It is a martyrrological event for a man who died more than 13 hundred years ago. In any case Husayn's death led to the Sunni-Shia split
which continues till this day. Shism is largely confined to Iran, Iraq and the East coast of Arabia, and comprises about 15% of the world's Muslim population.

Both Judaism and Christianity were normally permitted to continue under Islamic regimes, both being seen as prophetic forerunners to the 'true faith.' But non-Muslims were required to pay a rather stiff tax which believers in Islam did not. There sometimes were restrictions on what non-Muslims might do, especially during Muslim holy days. Such things probably played a part in a drift to Islam and away from Christianity. However, throughout much of its history Islam measured up rather well against the assorted Christian churches with their tastes for witch hunting and heresy sniffing.

It may well have been that the Christian church of the Byzantine empire was an especially oppressive and obscurantist entity riven by bitter if largely incomprehensible dissensions. It was a church steeped in the blood of those it considered pagans (i.e. believers in the traditional gods). A century after it had been proclaimed the state religion of the Eastern Roman Empire it was imposed on all those within its domain by force. By the time of the arrival of the Arab-Islamic armies in the seventh century Byzantine Christianity had alienated a great many believers -- the Coptic church, the Nestorians and others. This may partly explain the rapid military victories of Muslim forces over Byzantine armies. Many Christians may have preferred Muslim rulers to the Byzantines.

Under Islam all the leading officials of government were exclusively Muslims. In regions which retained substantial Jewish and Christian populations separate judicial authorities might administer them, although in cases where both Muslim and non-Muslim parties were involved Islamic law seems to have applied. The main disability which effected non-Islamic members of the population was a special tax paid by non-believers. This seems to have nominally been three to ten percent of their yearly earnings but it is anyone's guess as to how much anyone actually paid.

In Islam there has never been a single unified church or religious hierarchy with the power to direct the social and political actions of all believers. However in the Shia branch of Islam individual religious clerics can rise to great political importance and impose their interpretations of Islam on masses of their followers. Shia Islam still reveres the persons of 'hidden imams' who are believed to still be alive, in some sense, more than a millennium after their birth. The last of these was the twelfth hidden imam, a child when he left the sight of mankind in the 10th century A.D. This is the predominant hidden imam worshiped in Iran today. He disappeared into "occultation" about one thousand years ago but allegedly continues to influence his contemporary followers. There are also followers of other imams, such as the Ismailis and the Druze who follow the teachings of earlier or later hidden imams. What can one rationally reply to such views? 'I'm off to see the wizard, the wonderful wizard of Oz.'

In Islam there has never been a role equivalent to the pope in Christianity. On the other hand the requirements of being a Muslim are more clearly and simply spelled out in the Koran than in other religious texts.
While Islam does not recognize any inherent social boundaries between its believers, in practice the class and ethnic distinctions between its members are generally of fundamental importance. For instance, caste differences allegedly do not exist between Muslims in India, yet Indian Muslims include persons of different ranks which are as sharply set apart as are those of Hindus. Poorer and wealthier Muslims may participate in the Haj together but once that is over they immediately return to their separate paths.

Quite recently Islamic nations have seen a steady swing toward religious reaction. That may be partly due to the support which newly formed Islamic organizations have given to the poor, something which their own governments could somehow never accomplish. Islamic fundamentalists are often opposed to the venal governance controlled by corrupt rulers and their hangers on. One can't fault that. But generally such organizations require a heavy price for their aid, a demand for some future theocratic state. Theocratic states of whatever provenance always, ultimately, enslave the people they rule over.

There was a time, not so very long ago, when some Islamic nations contained substantial left-wing forces – Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Algeria, Afghanistan, Palestine, even Syria. There were communist and other leftist forces active among the Kurds of Turkey and throughout Iraq. At one time many Iranian workers were a part of the left. In Turkey left-wing forces were fairly strong into the 1970s when they were crushed by Turkish military rule. Left wing elements for some years controlled the government of South Yemen.

All of these progressive elements have been destroyed by either the military or by religious forces in support of Islamic ways. In the far east Indonesia had been bumbling along under a nationalist government led by one President Sukarno, but with the support of a million strong Communist party. It too was overthrown by an extraordinarily bloody military coup in 1965 which carried through a pogrom which may have slaughtered up to a million people and held hundreds of thousands of others in concentration camps for many years.

All this suggests that the presence of Islam does not inherently disallow the emergence of left wing forces and governments. But such forces are typically under threat of military and religious opponents which can act decisively to remove popular government. These asides have strayed from the discussion of Islam proper, to which we now return.

The Five Pillars of Islam

There are a few fundamental requirements which all Muslims must observe. They were established very early in Islamic society and flow from Mohammed's teachings and practice. They are known as the 'Five Pillars of Islam' and are as follows.

1. One must make public and open acknowledgement that there is only one god and that god is Allah. One must also acknowledge that Mohammed is the final and completed prophet of god. His account of god's wishes are final. (Moses and Christ
are accepted as valid prophets as well but their commandments are superseded by Mohammed's when the two conflict.)

2. God requires every believer to pray five times a day at set intervals and in the proper manner, i.e. kneeling with head bowed toward Mecca while pronouncing a ritual prayer. This normally takes place in mosques led by Muslim clerics but can also be done individually wherever one is.

3. Payment of Zakat, a tax of 2.5% of an individual’s wealth (or is it 2.5% earnings for the year?). In some Shia interpretations this tax can rise to 20% of yearly earnings. Zakat is not exclusively utilized as poor relief but can be legitimately used in any state operation for the public good, from building roads to financing 'just' wars.

4. One must observe the month long celebration of Rahmadan which includes fasting throughout the entire day (including the drinking of water). Meals are cooked and eaten during the nighttime hours during this festival. It also includes the avoidance of sex during this month. Infants and the ill are excluded from this requirement and the Shia are required to fast only during the first half of the day.

5. A pilgrimage (Haj) to Mecca during the one month pilgrimage season. This must have been an extremely costly and hazardous undertaking until the 20th century and there cannot have been many who could actually have made that trip. For most Muslims it would have cost far more than they could ever scrap together. In any case a Hadji -- one who had made the pilgrimage -- was a quite respected position among Muslims.

The Four (or Five) law codes

There are various interpretations of 'Sunna (the rules and deeds of the prophet), those contained in the Koran and in the three thousand or more 'hadiths', the collections of the decisions and comments by the prophet during his lifetime. These hadiths were passed down orally for 200 or more years before they were incorporated into legal codes in Muslim society. There sometimes is debate about which of the hadiths are legitimate and which apply in particular cases.

The **Hanifa school**. These are the historically first such ‘school’ of law drawn together by an Islamic scholar, one Abu Hanifah (699-767 A.D.) and finished by two of his students later. It is a massive compilation of potential legal thought drawn from the Koran, from the decisions and deeds of the prophet and from oral accounts of what he had said. These sayings had been building up over two centuries and the two scholars extracted some c. 3,500 legal comments from allegedly tens of thousands then in existence. The Hanafi code was extremely influential in later compilers of legal collections and is the most liberal of all the Islamic legal codes and also one of the most wide spread.

It was the most widely accepted 'legal' school throughout the original Abbasid Caliphate (750 A.D. to the mid twelfth century) and throughout the core lands of the Islamic middle East. It was later adopted by the Turkish empire which followed the Abbasids until the early 1920s and was spread from India to Egypt. It makes considerable room for local customs and rational interpretations of the asserted texts.
The Maliki school was composed by a Meccan scholar named Malik and is based strongly on the hadiths revolving around Mohammed's sunna (deeds and decisions) and those traditions stemming from his lifetime. It is considered to be quite conservative and is practiced in Northwestern and western Africa as well as in the Persian Gulf region.

The Shafi'i school is a widely accepted legal school which is based upon a massive text which attempts to systematize the bases for legal decisions. It is based on the sunna (Mohammed's decisions and practice) and on comments about him and his initial followers. It is held to be the most tolerant of the legal schools and dominates Southern Egypt and is predominant among Asian followers of Islam.

The Hanbali school was established by one Amad Hanbal in the ninth century A.D. and is possibly the most conservative (or reactionary) of the four original religious schools. It also is based on Mohammed's sunna but is quite literal in carrying out the judgements of ninth century Arabia. It was once restricted to central Arabia and is the basis for the Wahhabi school which emerged from that region nine centuries later -- little changed.

During the late ninth century these different schools agreed to accept each other's interpretations of Islamic law and customs as correct ones. I don't believe this applies to Wahhabi interpretations today however.

A contemporary version of the Hanbol law is the Wahhabi school which emerged among the Saudi tribal group in the late eighteenth century and has become dominant in Saudi Arabia since the 1920s. It is the most literal and most oppressive of the Islamic codes and was mainly limited to Saudi Arabia. It was mainly a backwater curiosity until the emergence of Arabian oil wealth and influence.

Wahhabism was once involved in jihads against Shias during its earlier history. It was the creed adopted by its patron tribe, the Saudi of north central Arabia. During the 1980s Wahhabism became influential in supporting religious schools in impoverished backward regions such as Afghanistan. In it jurisprudence fell into a state of barbarism, sentencing those convicted of stealing to having a hand cut off or a foot cut off for a second offense. And actually carrying out these sentences.

In Saudi Arabia the Wahhabi code defended chattel slavery which continued de jure until the late 1950s. In recently 'liberated' Afghanistan this code sentenced people convicted of 'serious crimes' such as adultery or blasphemy to death by public stoning.

There is also a Shia legal code called the Shi'i school which is largely limited to Iran. It was established by the devotees of the twelfth imam during the tenth and eleventh century A.D. Says Mahmoud Ayoub in The Islamic Tradition in World Religions (2002, Willard Oxtoby (ed.):

"In fact, the essential point of difference between the Shi'i and the Sunni legal traditions is the Shi'is fundamental belief in the necessity of the imams as guardians of the shari'ah (law) and guides of the community to its correct interpretation and implementation. The Imam is believed to be the proof
or argument of God [rule] over his human creatures. Hence the earth cannot be without an Imam, be he manifest and active in the management of the affairs of the community or hidden from human sight and perception" (2002: 392-393).

Regarding the collections of hadiths (oral accounts of Mohammed's sayings and decisions) on which much of Islamic law is based, these did not solidify until the ninth century, almost two hundred years after the death of Mohammed. The comparable bases in Shia law did not solidify until a century after that.

Of the various canonical collections of hadiths two are today most widely accepted. They were compiled in the late ninth century by two Islamic scholars who extracted some c. 3,500 hadiths from a mass of some tens of thousands then circulating in Islamic regions.

Slavery was permissible under these religious codes as is beating children and wives. In some interpretations delivering personal vengeance is also permissible. Of course, just as Muslim-owned banks have managed to find ways of getting around the Koran's proscriptions on charging interest on loans so too have lawyers managed to skirt many of the medieval laws inherent in Islam.

Some commentators hold that the degree of disagreement with Islamic law permitted is rather small. If there is a certain allowance made for the beliefs of Jews and Christians under Islamic law none of these apply to atheism. Atheism like blasphemy is a horrendous crime under all Islamic religious codes and is barely acceptable only where the laws of a secular state precede those of religion. Under certain Islamic regimes atheism carries a death penalty. To write this book would be to incur such a penalty.

**Sunni and Shia**

The fundamental split in Islam became that between the Sunni and the Shia. The break between the two schools occurred when the Ummayid rulers killed Mohammed's grandson in 680 A.D., some fifty years after the death of Mohammed himself, after the deaths of the initial 'righteously guided' Caliphs, two of whom were assassinated after briefs reigns. While the Sunni-Shia split must have been based upon some material interest of those involved its rationale revolves around whether the closest male relative of Mohammed should be the spiritual-political ruler of all Muslims (the Shia view) or whether that role should be held by someone chosen by a council of the most important leaders of the Muslim state (the Sunni view).

Husayn's death at Karbala may have seemed like an end to that dispute but Shi'ism emerged and is still with us today. The basis of Shia leadership came to revolve around the alleged ancestry of those making their claim. All of the Shia supreme leaders had to be or manufacture a claim to descent from the Prophet. Throughout the history of Shia Islam various sects have broken away to worship assorted imams which have trod the world and then gone into 'occultation', a physical hiddenness in which the imam is still believed to be living, in some sense. The worldly affairs are left to ordinary religious leaders. The Ismaili are a fairly wealthy Shia sect
while the Druze of Lebanon and Israel is another Shia offshoot revolving around an expectation of a personal rebirth of its members into this world as new children. Such sects are anathema to the more orthodox Sunnis who consider such claims as ungodly blasphemy.

Not initially but fairly soon after its emergence Shia beliefs came to represent Iranian national allegiance, but why couldn’t this have found another vehicle? The supporters of Shi’ism in multisect Islamic states are likely to be the poorer members of their societies and are often given to extreme emotions, particularly those of martyrdom and bloody demonstrations of self mutilation and whipping. Whatever the Sunni or Shia religious differences are they cross-cut allegiances of class and status, it is usually said.

The spread of Islam in Southeast Asia was initially slow and modest, unlike the first great expansion in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia. Apart from occasional Arab seamen visiting Indonesia at the time of Mohammed the first Islamic states emerged on Sumatra in the early 12th century A.D. They and a few other neighboring Islamic states had achieved regional prominence by the 15th century. By the early seventeenth century Islam was probably the predominant religion in the Indonesian archipelago. Such Islam was of course intermixed with continuing indigenous practices and beliefs. The version of Islam which spread throughout the East was taken from the Shafi code of Islamic law. This originally was comparatively close to Shia views which held that religious and secular leadership should be held by the same person. The Dutch imposed their control over the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) throughout the seventeenth century but generally left the indigenous rulers in nominal control of particular regions.

Islam has a reputation for transcending racial differences between believers. This has often been noted about the intersecting members of races co-operating in the Haj to Mecca. However marriage between members of Muslim families of differing racial background are relatively rare. Also, in former Muslim India Islam supposedly permits no fundamental distinctions to exist between Muslims and does not recognize the validity of castes. Nevertheless, the usual separation between members of different castes applied among Indian Muslims.

There is also the question of slavery, which is permitted in the Koran but supposedly no Muslim was allowed to hold another Muslim as a slave. This probably was circumvented through some legal legerdemain since all Islamic societies once kept slaves, some of whom must have been Muslim.

Speaking of the Islamic conquest of Egypt in 635 A.D. Jane Smith in “Islam and Christendom” (in John Esposito, ed., The Oxford History of Islam, 1999) notes that the Coptic church in Egypt was riven by deep conflicts and that the Byzantine clerics had fastened a dogmatic and sectarian version of Christianity on Egyptians.

"For many Christians the arrival of Islam was actually seen as liberation from the tyranny of fellow Christians rather then as a menace or even a challenge to their own faith. Such acquiescence of course, was encouraged
by the fact that under Islam they were guaranteed the right to continue as independent communities. The dimmi (subject) status, despite the obligations and lower status attached to it, was for many a preferable option to Byzantine oppression" (1999: 311).

This may have been equally true throughout the other middle eastern regions which the Islamic military forces captured so rapidly and easily. Byzantine subjects throughout Syria, Palestine, along the Euphrates and elsewhere may have found (or at least hoped) that the Islamic invaders would be less oppressive than the Byzantines were.

During the more than 700 year presence of Islamic rulers in Spain the Muslims were always a clear minority of the population. There too the incredibly rapid advance of small Muslim forces probably had much to do with fragmentation and mutual distrust of those living in the Visigothic Christian state. However, over time, many Christians began to adopt Islamic ways -- they often borrowed the dress of the Moors, came to appreciate their foods and gave up eating pork, they came to enjoy Arabic music and some Spanish women began wearing the veil and following various other Islamic fashions. They became known as the 'Mozarabs' and had a hard time of it after the Christian Reconquista (Jane Smith, 1999: 319-320).

This cultural blending of the two cultures largely came to an end with the deposition of the Ummayid Caliphate in eleventh century Spain. Thereafter two ultra conservative Moorish regimes were established. Those Muslims who later were trapped in or chose to remain in the Christian conquered regions were treated as dangerous new subjects and their culture systematically destroyed. Their descendants were later all deported to North Africa.

The Abbasid Caliphate which was established after the defeat of the Ummayids in 750 A.D. lasted until the Mongol invasion which killed the last Abbasid ruler in 1258. One of the ninth century Caliphs, Harun al Rashid, became a prominent figure in history through the explorations and trade ventures he supported. The capital city of Baghdad was built during the early Abbasid reign and was long a center of human knowledge. This was possibly the highpoint of Islamic/Arab culture in the western world. It was a fairly long lived dynasty although in its final century the Abbasid Caliph was mainly a voice piece for shifting political factions. The Abbasid military was increasingly composed of foreign mercenaries, especially Turks.

However already by the eleventh century Egypt had broken free from the Abbasid empire and was being governed by a dynasty known as the Fatimid Caliphate. By the thirteenth century it was mainly in the hands of emigre Turks who were powerful enough to defeat the Mongol army sent against them. It was the only military force to do so. First the Seljuk and then the Ottoman Turks took up the mantle of the Caliphate, a reign that lasted some 600 years until Turkey's defeat in World War 1.

Akbar Ahmed, a current explainer of Islam to western readers, is something of a reactionary but manages to simplify some religious differences between Sunni and Shia Islam. He says that Sunnis believe that the direct revelations of god ended with
Mohammed and that all religious leaders since then ruled purely by human understanding. The Shia however believe that the descendants of Mohammed, through their blood connections, have special insights into and a proper estimation of religious and political acts. While in Sunni Islam the Caliph is chosen by a gathering of secular and religious leaders (in theory if not in practice) in Shia Islam the Ayatollah arises through demonstrations of his own piety and vision

"The Imam is both political leader and religious guide who is himself divinely guided. He is the final authoritative interpreter of God's will as formulated in Islamic law and thus has almost unlimited power. This concentration of religious authority is unique to the Shia and is not accepted by the Sunni. For Sunnis religious authority required to interpret Islam lies in the consensus of the ulema, the traditional religious scholars" (Amed, Akbar, Living Islam, 1993: 51).

The Empire of the Turks
The spread of Islam through the heartland of the Byzantine empire was accomplished when the Turks emerged out of central Asia and rose to power through serving as paid warriors for established Islamic regimes. This began in the century before the western crusades. Those initially involved were the Seljuk Turks, an entity which emerged from central Asia in the late ninth century. They later warred with the crusader states established along the eastern Mediterranean. However in the two centuries after 1099 (i.e., the Christian seizure of Jerusalem) all crusaders were driven out of the region. The Seljuk Turks were followed by the Ottoman Turks, both of them relatively recent converts to Islam who retained some of their pre-Islamic ways.

The Seljuk Turks initially defeated Byzantine armies sent against them in but were scattered by the Mongol invasions of 1243. The Seljuks were then replaced by the Ottoman Turks who served initially as mercenaries of the Byzantine Empire but then set out to replace it until there was little but Constantinople left. That imperial city, the final claimant to the Roman Empire, was besieged and taken in 1453 by the Ottoman Turks. They gradually conquered much of the Balkan peninsula and ruled from Hungary to Tunisia to the borders of Iran. At the height of its power in the mid-seventeenth century the Ottomans besieged Vienna after which they were slowly driven out of Europe. Nevertheless, Ottoman rule over many lands and peoples lasted from 1281 to 1924, some six centuries.

During the height of Turkish power the head of the empire was the Sultan with his capital in Constantinople, although through the final century of the Turkish empire he was normally a front for various political cliques. The Christian populations living in Turkish-occupied Europe tended to feel themselves (and were) oppressed by a foreign power. They were mainly populations of peasants spread throughout the Balkans. Most retained their Orthodox Christian allegiances throughout the long Turkish occupation and were treated as second class subjects.

Turkey gradually lost all of her non-Turkish possessions and just barely managed to escape being split up between the victorious powers after World War 1. It was
preserved by a modernist-nationalist movement led by one Pasha Kemal Ataturk who, after he had defeated Greek invaders, sent the Caliph packing and initiated a thoroughgoing modernization program which initially suppressed many of the traditional 'powers of darkness'.

**Hindu fundamentalism**


"It is hard to identify a common denominator in Hinduism. While some texts and some deities are widely accepted there is no single text, single deity or single teacher that all Hindus would deem authoritative or supreme. There is a corpus of holy works and many people hold some of those texts to be of cosmic origin but other non-literate Hindus may not even have heard of these compositions. Similarly there are many local deities with local names who may or may not be identified with more recognizable pan-Indian gods. Hindu traditions made of hundreds of communities and sectarian movements each of which has its hallowed canons, its own sacred place to which members make pilgrimage and its own deity who it holds to be absolutely supreme." (Vol. 2, 2002: 13.

Estimates of the number of gods and goddesses flitting about India at present range around one thousand major gods/goddesses with possibly up to one hundred thousand minor gods and spirits present in the entire country.

Hindu traditions have allegedly developed from the fusion of the cultures of the indigenous inhabitants of India and those of the Aryan invaders who entered the region at about 1,500 B.C. Agriculture was already then well established by the indigenous population and the resulting culture spread gradually throughout the entire peninsula. It is not at all certain what the social stratification of early Indian society was like nor whether the Aryan invaders fundamentally changed the basic structure of Indian society, although the languages of the northern three quarters of the population speak are derived from ancestral Indo-European.

One Indian writer would look on the inequitable distribution of land and wealth and trace its cause back to the ideology which the invading Aryans got the Indian indigenes to believe. T.V. Annadurai's *Neethi Thevan Mayakkam*, 1952 (*The Seduction of the Good King*) is a Tamil agitational play written to support the campaigns of the Dravidian Toilers Party.

".... it portrays the Indian caste system and the Brahmanic traditions as the codification of conquest by Hindu rulers two millennia previously and a major sacred text (the Ramayana) as nothing but ideological propaganda dressed up as religion in order to ease their rule over the Tamil speaking people" (Knight, R., *Traces of Magma. An annotated bibliography of left literature*, 1983: 280).
Or there is the more famous Hindi writer known as Yashpal who in 1945 wrote a historical novel called *Divya* which dealt with a north Indian kingdom and portrays the resistance of the bulk of the people to the initial establishment of the caste system. There is also Tottiyyuta Makan's 1947 *Scavenger*, a novel originally in Malayalalam which deals with three generations of a family of outcastes in southern India whose members initially accept their position, then a father who strives to raise his status which includes social degradation as well as poverty. The grandson finally gains a minor white collar job but is unable to sustain the constant striving needed to retain his position and falls back into the 'sweeper' caste. It is a richly descriptive account of the evanescence of individual advancement without changing the social system (Knight, R., *Traces of Magma*, 1983:283, 290).

There is also a personal anecdote once told by Kathleen Gough about her initial anthropological field work among a south Indian peasantry. She had supposed that the religious beliefs recounted by landowners in the region would be shared by all but on questioning the peasants they were amazed that anyone would hold such views. They certainly didn't but suggested that the local landlords might believe such things.

To turn to the historical efflorescence of religious beliefs in India, from circa 900 B.C. we begin to find established writings about specific Hindu rituals and some centuries later the massive story collections about the doings of Indian gods and kings. It may be that someone with the capacity to read these texts may be able to determine something about what conditions existed historically. But we do not yet have any reliable accounts of the original Indian population or what their religious practices were. The *RigVeda*, the earliest written document from India in Sanskrit was composed between 900 and 600 B.C. But it says little reliably about actual daily life and social structure then.

"While most educated Indians today would agree that the Vedas are the most ancient and central books of Hinduism few would be able to outline what these Vedas actually say. [Moreover] the process of understanding the Vedas has not been static. In every generation their message has been interpreted in a manner fitting and applicable to that generation." (V. Narayanan, in W. Oxtoby, ed., *World Religions*, vol. 2, 2002: 22).

Some forty years ago during the mid 1970s numbers of young (but not that young) individuals, searching for some alternative outlook to that prevalent in America, turned to a quite romantic and false view of Indian society and culture. In general their conceptions involved a peaceful people living in a society poor but brimming with spirituality. Their comprehension of the scale of exploitation and oppression in pre-colonial and contemporary India was virtually nil. In fact the history of India is rife with inter state and civil wars, of banditry and of the violence of the wealthy against the poor. The wars of Indian kings against other kings, fought by nameless soldiers, are woven through the text of ancient tales, religious or otherwise.
India today is a nation of over a billion people, with some 70-75% still living by relatively primitive agriculture. Many exist in a deepening poverty. It is a nation with a rising urban middle class but also with others in extreme want. Modern India oscillates from centrist to right-wing nationalist governments whose people can be mobilized to assault Muslims, lower caste Hindus, and members of the Indian left. The right-wing organizations have broadened and are ready to attack anyone who is not Hindu.

The B.J.P. (Bharatiya Janata Party) has been able to win national and state elections and has occasionally constituted the federal government of India. There are a host of other right-wing movements in India all glorifying their beliefs about traditional Indian society. The R.S.S. the (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) has an armed or at least militarized youth and strong arm section. These are organizations with a multi million membership. Arundhati Roy refers to them clearly as ‘fascist groupings’ in her “Fascism's Firm Footprints in India” (in Nothing Sacred, Betsy Reed, ed., 2002:179-186). Probably so, they are also entangled in programs to preserve allegedly traditional Indian society with its claims of sacred roots. Sacred famines, sacred serfdom, and sacred exploitation which typically work the poor and lower castes to an early death.

In the same volume Martha Nussbaum notes that some of India's most right wing parties have constructed and run on a program of mythical Hindu traditions which they claim they want to retrieve.

"The Hindu right has succeeded in winning popularity for a politically constructed version of Hinduism in which Rama is the central deity. But the fact is that this is a politically constructed version of history rather than ancient tradition is plain from recent attempts to muzzle and discredit serious historians of Hinduism (who for example, point out that Hindus once ate cattle)” (M. Nussbaum, “Religion, Culture, and Sex Equality”, in Betsy Reed, ed., Nothing Sacred, 2002: 219).

It may be that some readers believe that fascism was something uniquely Italian as Nazism was something inherently German. They may feel that applying such terms to other regimes is simply phrase mongering. However it is the case that fascism/Nazism do not have a monopoly on oppressive movements. One can point to a roster of regimes, both in the past and the present, which have had equally repressive histories. Any one who sets out to maintain a slave-like class of people within a society and mobilizes force to retain it is in effect following a program of fascism. If such conditions flow from ancient Hindu beliefs and practices then let no one object to this designation.

After sixty-five years of independence India has still been unable to distribute the lands of large landowners to a peasantry which desperately needs it. And will probably never do so. It has been unable to eliminate the activities of the plethora of rapacious money lenders and unable to supersede the endless social proscriptions which surround daily life in village India. Some may hold that all these factors
constitute elements of Indian culture and should not be within the sphere of government concern. It depends upon what kind of society one wants to defend, the oppression of the past or a society yet to be born.

This puts me in mind of a once famous reply by a British colonial administrator in India to a pack of Brahmans who came to demand that recent (circa 1854) laws prohibiting suttee be quashed.

'Suttee was an ancient Hindu tradition' they said. It was a way for a widowed wife to honor her dead husband (by being burned to death on his funeral pyre). To forbid it would strike at the heart of family honor and at Hindu religious beliefs.' The British governor is alleged to have replied, 'We too have our ancient beliefs and customs. When men burn women to death we hang them. Should you follow your customs in these matters we will surely follow ours.'

Such a response will today be denounced by some as deeply offensive and totally ethnocentric but it seems to me to be the correct reply to such traditions. Let the Brahmans and others yammer till the heavens fall but no government worth its name should allow itself to be swayed by such religious demands.

Betsy Reed's edited volume Nothing Sacred, Women respond to religious fundamentalism and terror (2002) contains articles by some 34 women authors. They discuss various aspects of women's treatment by religious authorities in Christian, Islamic and Hindu contexts. Some of these articles deal with the support given by women to the right wing BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). Typically these are the actions of middle class women eager to rise on a wave of Hindu chauvinism. Some of the accounts are quite revealing since Westerners have often been loathe to criticize indigenous middle classes in formerly colonial nations.

In Hinduism, with its multitude of gods and goddesses, one should note the ideological backstop of the caste system. Few cultures evolved a more oppressive regime. Despite claims to personal serenity such a quality probably applies mainly among the financially secure. Defenders of religious practices here and elsewhere can and do defend almost any practice under the sun. As for the doings of the Hindu gods and goddesses, they are virtually endless, there are creator and destroyer gods, elephant headed and monkey-like gods, and a series of thousands of attendant gods and goddesses who play a role in some Indian region or among one group or another. Many of these gods transform over time into other gods with different names, form and with different qualities. They have different characters as they pass through different eras. Apparently there is little overall agreement on the relative priority of these gods but there is a host of gurus ready to provide their own interpretations of holy tales and directions on how to live life.

In Hinduism, as in its off-shoot Buddhism, souls are recurringly reborn into this world, their status partly dependant on how they have lived previously. One's life does not emerge from personal decisions and external conditions but is partly the outcome of consequences stemming from previous lives.

An individual's rights, duties and life chances are largely set by the caste into which one is born, Brahmans, warriors (and land owners), merchants, peasants and the non castes who are at the mercy of all. In fact there are something like a thousand
specific castes currently existent in India, differing by region and by the past success or failure of these particular castes to raise their economic status or not. However those at the bottom of the caste system remain at the bottom while those near the top remain at the top. Indian governments during the twentieth century have attempted to counterbalance the restrictions created by caste but it is clear that they have not had much success.

Some fifteen to twenty percent of the population remain as ‘outcastes’ while a large additional population remains as hard-scrabble peasants or landless artisans. Those figures comprise hundreds of millions of individuals. It is yet to be seen whether religious traditions and sacred restrictions will be enough to keep everyone in his/her assigned place.

Buddhism, the other-worldly?

We may conceive of Buddhism as an other-worldly outlook whose adherents allow others to believe what they will and have never imposed a dominion over others. But even a passing reflection about the lands in which Buddhism is important should raise questions about the basis of such claims. Who built and rebuilt the vast arrays of temples and shrines in the lands of Buddhism? And who supported the armies of priests and monks and acolytes who once peopled them? The peasantry of those lands of course since the Buddhist monks usually did no practical work.

The original Buddha was a son of a minor Hindu noble family in Northeastern India in circa 500 B.C. He journeyed around India during his youth but during his later life he allegedly sat in or beside a Hindu temple expounding his mystical wisdom to a band of followers. For some unfathomable reason, after his death Buddhism gradually grew into a major force in India between then and the ninth century A.D. By that time it had already spread throughout South east Asia and into China and finally into Japan. Buddhism had originally been transmitted orally until, some time after the Buddha's death, reminisces of what he had taught were committed to paper by a devotee. How accurately these accounts mirror his actual teachings is anybody's guess.

Buddhism became the official or preferred religion in a number of North Indian states from a few hundred years after Buddha's death until eight or nine hundred A.D., after which Hinduism again became dominant throughout India. One school of Buddhism, Theravada, became the state religion of Sri Lanka, Thailand and Cambodia for about a thousand years. The second major tradition of Buddhism, Mahayana, became important in China during the Tang dynasty during 600-1,000 A.D. and on. It became mixed with the worship of traditional Chinese gods and supernatural forces (especially in folk Buddhism) and spread to Korea and Japan, where it gradually replaced worship of the traditional supernatural entities. (See Roy Anmore and Julia Ching, "The Buddhist Tradition" in World Religions, The Eastern Traditions, Willard Oxtoby (ed.), Vol.2, 2002.)

Another school, Vajrayana, came to dominate Tibet and Mongolia at a later date. It spread from northern India in the eight century A.D. and is the form dominant in Tibet and once in Mongolia. It is seemingly the form most thoroughly mixed with
local gods and spirits. Prayer wheels, endless holy charms and assorted devils emerged in this impoverished region, as well as Dalai Lamas and comparable spiritual leaders. In Tibet the dominant monastic order and the Dalai Lama acted as the state itself, it collected taxes and provided what judicial authority there was.

These three general schools of Buddhism, each with different rituals, with emphasis on different teaching, are mixed with earlier indigenous gods and beliefs. The religious grades among Buddhist monks include acolytes, established members of specific Buddhist orders and their leaders. While there are some wandering monks normally Buddhists were attached to monastery communities. Their members were required to refrain from all sexual activity, refrain from eating meat, be personally poor and should be given to removing themselves from all earthly desires. It sounds rather like the requirements of monks in Catholic orders, other than not having a personal god to worship and appeal to.

Like Hinduism, Buddhism believes in the recurrent rebirth of souls into newborn humans or into other animals, depending on how properly an individual had lived in the previous lifetime. Buddhism may accept the existence of many gods and spirits but the fundamental force of reincarnation continues regardless of the will of gods. Only a small number of humans attain Nirvana, the state in which consciousness of all things ceases and one's soul just ceases to be. The final endpoint of all Buddhist striving.

Buddhism itself proclaims the existence of no god or set of gods, none at all but it was often conjoined with regional gods and spirits of considerable variety. In China Buddhism was conjoined with earlier gods, spirits and devils of many sorts. But it is itself based upon an escape from the cycles of rebirth and seems to largely dismiss the actual lives of its adherents in the only world they will ever know. It counsels the poor to accept the conditions of their lives in this world so that they may raise their status in a following life. It envisions an endless series of lives, sometimes in human sometimes in animal form, until enlightenment is attained and the soul is dissipated in Nirvana. Nothingness. It can involve a complete disinterest in the world, human sentiments and beliefs and anything one might consider to be reality.

In some schools of Buddhism one's behavior on earth may result in punishments after death. In some interpretations the living can ease the passage of the dead through the performance of various expensive rites at the local Buddhist temple. This sounds something like the Catholic doctrine of the remission of sins through the payment of fees to the Catholic church. It is not generally mentioned in discussions about mystical serenity but some versions of Buddhism conceive of terrible otherworldly punishments for misdeeds done in this world. Some versions of Buddhism have a dozen to almost fifty odd layers of hell to which sinners may be bound, each worse than the other. A situation not in keeping with the other worldly reputation which Buddhism has acquired.

The case of Buddhism in Japan, with its armed religious orders and their all too material actions, is seemingly at odds with the mysticism of that religion. For instance the Nichiren sect of Japanese Buddhism during the height of its power in the Ashikaga period (c. 1300-1580) maintained its own military forces and fought major
battles against assorted Japanese feudal warlords -- and sometimes won. Such monks could hardly have been other worldly.

Japanese Zen Buddhism, which acquired adherents in North America during the 1950s and 1960s, is suffused with mysticism yet was allied with the Japanese feudal ruling class. During the Tokugawa period in Japan (c. 1600 to 1868) Zen Buddhism's key adherents were likely to be the Samurai, who were the officer class of the ruling feudal regime. Whatever the finer religious aspects of this sect were its adherents supported the oppression of the bulk of the Japanese people.

In Tibet, that now lost wonder world of mystical truth seekers, when the current Dalai Lama ascended the throne in the mid 1940s the country was still in the grip of an open serfdom. Tibet was a uniformly backward, impoverished and superstition ridden patch of mountains and high steppe land. Raising food and cattle there was always problematic. When the Communist Chinese military forces entered Tibet in the early 1950s they were not greeted as liberators but as Chinese invaders. They probably were ethnocentric, making no allowances for the multitude of indigenous spirits and demons which infested the place. This raised the hackles of American and allied defenders of religious freedom and the integrity of small (satellite) nations.

The then and current Dalai Lama and a passel of his supporters soon fled to India from where they launched world wide tours for Tibetan democracy, a somewhat strange undertaking for one with such other worldly concerns. This Dalai Lama has spun his Buddhism into a lucrative routine in the intervening years but what did he have to say about the sufferings of his fellow Asians during the dozen years when the Viet Namese people endured a genocidal colonial war waged by America? I don't remember hearing him comment on it at all. To their credit many Viet Namese Buddhists did not accept such otherworldly views and sometimes played heroic roles in opposition to the comprador regime. Which I suppose demonstrates that believers in even the most otherworldly of religions may at some point act as if the world around them matters after all.

In China, Confucianism came to essentially be a partner of the state and its narrowly class-based mandarins. Some forms of Buddhism however became the popular religion of many Chinese. In the assorted dynastic and peasant struggles, which emerged throughout more than two thousand years in China, certain Buddhist orders evolved into secret societies some of which supported popular resistance movements while others did not. Some of them played important roles in the ouster of decayed and senescent dynasties, others did not.

This all emerged in one of the greatest peasant risings in history during the mid 19th century, when the Manchu dynasty was already crumbling. The Tai-ping (Heavenly Peace) revolt began in the early 1850s when a footloose Chinese (madman or truth seeker?) received a vision of how Chinese society must be reordered so as to bring 'heavenly peace' to its people. China was then an extraordinarily impoverished and hunger-ridden society.

The Tai-ping ideology was a thrown together mixture of anti-landlord sentiments, communal land working, and assorted spiritual claims drawn from the large stock available, including elements of Christianity, as well as schemes of family
reorganization. For reasons which are still unclear the Tai-ping revolt spread like wild fire over all of southern China defeating whatever military forces the Manchu dynasty sent against it. It established its capital in Nanking and by the 1860s looked like it might establish itself over the rest of China.

While the Tai-pings were finally defeated, mainly by private armies organized by combinations of local landlords, it demonstrated the fluidity into which folk Buddhism could be channeled. The retribution exacted by the Manchu-landlord forces was more horrendous than can be conveyed. By some estimates tens of millions of individuals, men and women, old and young, devout followers or simple bystanders were slaughtered by the Imperial forces. In some provinces the decimation was so drastic that population figures did not return to the previous levels for a century afterward.

What has the Tai-ping revolt to do with Buddhism and its adherents and what has it to say about the generally oppressive nature of religions? Just this -- as in Christianity, Islam or any other religion can become extraordinarily militant regardless of the other worldliness of their official beliefs. A great many of those involved in the bloody struggles known as the Tai-ping revolt were to some degree Buddhists. It was a part of their common culture. This did not prevent them from acting on very material goals for very material reasons.

Undoubtedly many Buddhists in troubled areas continued to chant their mantras and contemplate Nirvana -- which could effect nothing which happened in the real world. But as in the Viet Nam liberation war many practicing Buddhists could play heroic roles in the struggle against the real forces of oppression which faced them and their people. Apparently that was not out of keeping with their religious views.
CHAPTER 10

Tribal and Non State Religions

Polytheism and Tribal Religions

While the central theme here has been to debate some central claims of Christianity, it should be clear that I and other atheists are equally opposed to other religions as well. This applies to belief in traditional polytheistic religions in so far as they are still a factor in human social practices. That they play a minor role in current social arrangements was not true in the past.

Anthropologists often have enthused about supernatural beliefs and conjoined practices in primitive societies and can rarely find anything negative to say about them. There is usually plenty that could be said against them however -- their pointless and sometimes oppressive prohibitions, the fear of supernatural entities they entail, their many faceted social restrictions and the fact that they maintain a vibrant ignorance about truly existing forces in the world. However all this could equally be charged against the monotheistic religions.

In some traditional polytheistic religions the supposed afterlife of humans is of relatively minor importance to the living. Religion in such societies was mainly involved in regulating what one does in the present life. What is clear however is that human beings, sometimes very intelligent ones, can maintain both a belief in traditional spiritual forces alongside modern scientific knowledge. People can operate quite effectively while retaining both viewpoints and without feeling any need to replace one with the other.

The religious practices of tribal people cannot usually be easily extracted from the rounds of everyday life. It is usual to claim that their religious beliefs are all pervasive, that they penetrate a wide range of activities. But it is equally true that pragmatic and everyday tasks also pervade the realms of religion in most tribal societies. Typically the belief systems of such societies are described as having descended, mainly unchanged, from time immemorial. This normally means about as long as the oldest members of the group can remember, often less. It may be that religious practices continue in unchanging forms but not necessarily more unchanging than many other practices. In state organized society there may be little modification of religious practices over centuries but in traditional tribal societies the fluidity in all things can affect religious beliefs. Myths and claimed kin relationships can be quite malleable.

Students of comparative religion have sometimes been given to ferreting out regularities that are claimed to be pan-human. Readers or listeners of Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949) will note his Buddhist-Freudian message -- in effect that all the authentic myths of the world are sacred and all revolve around the same story. The quest of enlightenment-seeking men to rise above material existence.
However such grand summation of religious belief may miss the salient point, that the religions of non-state organized peoples may be closely related to and vary with the requirements of economic material life. Certainly there are many similarities and a constant mixture of the religious practices followed by different peoples. But a truer understanding of religious phenomena may lie with the host of specific processes they effect or control. These may range from the inconsequential to the critical. The central lesson may be that there just is no single set of factors which explain the functions (or the non-functions) of religious practices. They vary with the differing conditions in which a people find themselves and the various strategies they use to deal with external conditions.

One of the characteristics of gods, goddesses and assorted spiritual beings in tribal religions is that adherents may hold quite variable beliefs about their nature and demands. Certainly there are approximate agreements on the supernatural forces abroad in the world but their particular importance to individuals can vary a great deal. This rarely seems to bother most believers in the relevant spiritual beings. To that extent there is a good deal of personal freedom in how to respond to certain spiritual forces, often much more so than in state organized religions.

Religion is often said to have many different reasons for existing about which one cannot easily generalize. Some anthropologists have suggested a host of quite material reasons why certain sacred beliefs and requirements exist in different societies. They propose quite secular, and not at all obvious, advantages which exist in various societies protected by different sacred rules. Marvin Harris' astute investigation of the material reasons behind the sacred protection afforded to cows in Hindu religion is based upon the complexities of their economic role in peasant India.

What is loosely termed 'religious belief' may entail acts which have consequences in quite material arenas. Certain religious practices can have observable, testable, material consequences. One of the most persuasive examples of the above is a series of articles by Marvin Harris which countered the old view that the sacred cattle of India, which are inexplicably protected by Hindu religious beliefs, had filled the land with useless animals. The root of the problem, said many observers, is the doctrine of Ahimsa, the Hindu view of the sacredness of all life and a belief in the special sacredness of cows. Harris, in “The myth of the sacred cow” in A.P. Vayda and A. Leeds (eds.), *Man, Animals and Culture: The role of animals in human ecological adjustments*, 1965) set out to debunk this once universally misunderstood phenomena.

To start with we must recognize that sacred protection of cows stems from an earlier period in Indian/Hindu society when no alternative traction power was available. Horses require far larger tracts of fodder crops than do cattle. Then we must know that Indian agriculture is based on ox-drawn, plough tilled, farming. Also that oxen come only from cows. The fact is that there were/is actually a shortage of oxen to draw ploughs in India, not an excess of such animals. Given the nature of Indian lands fertilizer is absolutely essential to raise crops and that fertilizer is overwhelmingly cattle dung. This dung when dried also serves to heat most peasants
homes and to cook their food, coal and wood being far too expensive to be used as fuel.

Lactating cows provide milk which is processed into Ghee, the basic cooking oil, and the skimmed milk-yogurt which makes up a large proportion of the animal proteins consumed by farming families. Furthermore, regardless of how starved the cows are at certain times of the year they often are often still fertile and may provide a new bullock to its owner over time. All or most of the sacred cows wandering around rural and urban India, scavenging food from wherever they can, have owners who can be expected to appear if the animal drops a calf or if someone attempts to steal or kill her.

Sacred cows when they die may not be eaten by religious Hindus, however they are consumed by outcaste families who comprise more than fifteen percent of the Indian population. Such cattle may make up only a small percentage of the outcastes’ food intake but since they often survive on the edge of malnutrition their consumption of dead cattle makes up a significant addition to their protein intake, especially the scarce animal proteins.

To evaluate the usefulness of cows and cattle in India as meat providers, or by some other western standard of agricultural efficiency, completely misses the role which cattle actually play in extant Indian agriculture. They are not meat producers but providers of milk and a range of necessary by-products. Making cows sacred and religiously barring them from being slaughtered is a way of protecting such necessary animals. The Hindu beliefs about the sacredness of cows are based upon the material role they play in agriculture. That is fundamentally why they are protected by strong religious proscriptions against their slaughter.

In another case in the late 1950s Harold Schneider reported on the role of cattle among the Pakot of East Africa. The Pakot were a simple tribal people whose subsistence was heavily based on their mobile cattle herds, which they normally tapped for milk and blood as food. At the time there was a long established view about African herders which held that they kept cattle in excessive numbers mainly for ritual-prestige purposes, especially for bride price payments. Such excessive cattle herds led to a long term degradation of their pasture land it was said. A concomitant of this view was that consumption of cattle meat among African herders was limited to ritual occasions. The clear implication being that the number of cattle kept was largely determined by the role they played in ritual-prestige events.

Among the Pakot however the number of ritual occasions which required the slaughter and shared eating of cattle far outnumbered the occasions when cattle actually were slaughtered. In this case the actual slaughter-eating of cattle was determined by how large the herds were, what the grazing opportunities were, how many animals could be safely slaughtered, regardless of the ritual occasions which required eating cattle meat. This is another example of the flexibility of sacred rules - - when they are followed and when they are set aside in tribal societies. I suspect that the Pakot case is far more common than the accounts of how ritual requirements affect human utilization of available resources.
Yet another case is a reformulation of an alleged misdirection of human effort involved in growing and storing yams in the Trobriand islands of Melanesia, as classically described by B. Malinowsky in his *Coral Gardens and their Magic* (1935). In the textbook accounts the Trobrianders recurrently produced large surpluses of yams only to store them in open cribs for others to admire, the larger the filled store house the greater the prestige. But a large percentage of the yams were allegedly never eaten and simply spoiled in storage -- so the story went.

However Andrew P. Vayda wondered about how common such a case might be and suggested that an excess of stored yams over subsistence requirements would be relatively unusual, the results of an especially good harvest, which fluctuated widely from one year to the next. He noted that what would occasionally be an excess of stored yams would in most years be just sufficient to get by on. He also noted that the alleged losses of spoiled yams were not really lost at all but were fed to the Trobrianders’ pig herds which acted as a living store of vegetal food. In this case one must consider a 'prestige system' which maintains a food buffer (making bigger gardens than necessary) against years of poor harvests. An ecological analysis makes more sense for some sacred and prestige undertakings than does appealing to the unique socio-religious practices in a given society.

Such an ecological approach does not deal with religion or sacred practices in any uniform way because there are a host of different benefits and costs which may be entailed in different situations. This is nothing like talking about "the social functions of religion". Nor does it suggest that all or most aspects of religious practice support beneficial material consequences. The above are intended to suggest that anything described as holy or sacred can be investigated in regard to what the costs and benefits of a practice are -- who gets which material benefits from certain undertakings.

In the cases mentioned above we are some times dealing with what are traditionally termed 'religious' or 'prestige' aspects of the cultures involved but noted that they are closely geared to ecological processes. Indeed it sometimes seems that such consequences are more critical than the religious aspects involved. However the religious beliefs involved may be an important part of the process, adding some special motivation which may protect the system from being undercut by those seeking short term advantages.

**Native American Spirituality**

As for indigenous American beliefs in the supernatural, current attempts to reinvent them and to raise them to their former place in people's lives seems a poor strategy and an impossible undertaking (although admittedly I have been wrong in such suppositions before). Nevertheless those inclined to pursue such an enterprise do not entail a threat to anyone else so why object to such efforts? Many of its supporters hold that all varieties of spirituality must be accorded respect and support, even from those who do not believe in them, especially if such beliefs are those of First Nations people. This claim normally goes hand in hand with special land and resource claims and privileged rights for native people. However there is no good reason for an
unbeliever to support any one else's religion, in which he does not believe. Nor is there any good reason for anyone to respect what he does not believe in.

In many cases the nature of the earlier supernatural beliefs/practices have been much watered down and reshaped into more acceptable procedures than they were originally. Current native responses are partially a reaction to a half century of mission education and are shaped by burgeoning ethnic native nationalism. Ethnic nationalism holds that a particular people are totally unique and only understandable by members of that group themselves. The proper role of others is simply to believe whatever they are told and to transmit such stories to outsiders. It is an old ploy which has long been made by supporters of aboriginal culture and religion. Great Spirits, guardian spirits, the spirit of our salmon brothers, the spiritual nature of the land etc etc. are 'supernatural entities' which have reentered the topics of conferences, accompanied by drumming and dancing up a storm. All these are meant to convince non natives of the high spirituality of those about to make more material demands.

Native spirits and gods no more exist than do Christian or other ones. Simply because they are being reintroduced in conjunction with allegedly just causes does not mean that such entities and beliefs are themselves in any sense valid. Today must anything claimed to be spiritual by native people be deemed legitimate? Not necessarily so. Many native societies for which we have historical records suggest that some of their supernatural beliefs could be threatening and feared. Indigenous beliefs are not necessarily benign simply because they are exotic and now fashionable.

It is today unacceptable among 'progressives' and liberals to say anything negative about aboriginal spirituality or religion in general. Even those who normally cast a jaundiced eye on the claims of established religions tend to feel that indigenous spiritual claims have a certain validity even if they have been recently manufactured. The Federal Royal Commission on Aboriginal Rights in Canada (1997) featured vociferous native demands and fantasies as well as professional native supporters who acted as a chorus throughout the Commission's long hearings. Everyone was careful to sanctify any mention of native spiritual beliefs, no matter how preposterous the claims advanced. The only thing missing were spiritual messages from Grey Owl.

Charges were laid that 'the whiteman', his government agents, and almost every non-Indian in the past had set out to exterminate natives through the spread of white diseases and white culture. Prominent in such claims are accounts of how programs of 'cultural genocide' (meaning any change whatsoever) stripped natives of their traditional sacred knowledge which allowed them to live to healthy and vigorous old age. In the past aboriginal life was one long voyage of worthy tasks and general tranquility.

It is surprising that all the genocidal schemes of the whiteman had such contrary results. How is it that the population increase among native groups is so much higher than among non-aboriginals? In the last fifty odd years the numbers of status Indians in Canada have jumped from circa 125,000 in total to something over 750 to 800,000. That is more than a 500 percent increase in two generations. No doubt someone will
discover an explanation why this is all part of a plot to further disenfranchise native aboriginals in Canada.

Past inequities are now to be made good through the dispersal of additional massive funds and separate blocks of Indian resources as well as the operation and administration of separate native law, and by the teaching of native history and native spirituality in public school class rooms etc. etc. Priority native rights to fisheries and forest resources are well under way, closing off many resources for mere white workers. Naturally massive new funding must go to support native staffed administration. There has as yet been no proposals to establish programs in native physics and mathematics but funding for Native Spiritual Medical practitioners is well under way. In the future any native person having medical problems can turn first to their traditional medicine men. That should help a lot.

**On Indigenous European Religion**

An overview of the pantheon of classical Greek and Roman gods and goddesses, their behavior and histories is a task for a classics scholar and cannot be summarized here. They had a fairly good press among the classically schooled of Europe during the eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. The nature of some of these gods pervades the work of certain early psychoanalysts who believed they saw the outlines of pan human psychological formations in the associated myths. This seems rather doubtful but these gods are more open to human understanding than are those of the religions which displaced them.

In many polytheistic religions the afterlife of humans was of lesser importance than in Christianity. Religion was mainly concerned with regulating what one did in the present life. In classical Greek and Roman beliefs there was an underworld to which the spirits of the dead went but one in which they were neither tormented nor fulfilled. Instead they were reduced into gradually dissolving shades -- the afterlife was not of much consequence in how one lived one's worldly life. This attitude seems to be not unusual among many traditional belief systems.

'Paganism' is a word which meaninglessly lumps together all the many non-monotheistic religions, lumps them together without any rhyme or reason other than the fact that they are not Judeo-Christian or Islamic. At times competing forms of Christianity have derogated their rivals with the term 'pagan'. It is usually intended as a pejorative designation for those who hold beliefs in the existence of multiple gods. To describe something as 'pagan' typically fails to consider the complexity of such beliefs. It must have been pleasing for some to derogate allegiance to the older European gods and the religious beliefs of native peoples throughout the world. It probably relieved them of considering the silliness of their own religious views.

Both monotheism and polytheism could at times be oppressive and bloodthirsty. Whether they existed in chieftain organized societies, like those on the North West coast of North America, or primitive states, like those of the Aztecs and Incas, propitiation of the gods could sometimes involve numerous human sacrifices. Indigenous beliefs and actions do not necessarily deserve support simply because
their former practitioners were themselves badly treated. In any case, the term 'pagan'
when used here is not to be taken as a pejorative in any way.

We do not usually have a reliable historic record of most pagan religions in
regions which have long been under Christian or Islamic domination. The earlier
religious practices seem to be irretrievably lost, except for fragments of reworked
mythology. We find some Scandinavian traditions mentioned in the earliest Icelandic
sagas (c. 1200-1300 A.D). After that the destructive actions of Christianity wiped all
mention of past gods off the record.

An Old Norse Creation Tale

In the pre-Christian Nordic religion the great majority of humans simply died and
everything about them ended. Only the smallest handful of heros’ and military
leaders’ souls survived death to be carried up to Valhalla by the Valkyrie to join a
perpetual feast along with the old gods. Most religious belief systems do not make
perpetual room for most of the souls of the dead. Only disconnected fragments of the
traditional Norse religious beliefs have come down to us, largely from the written
versions of Icelandic sagas. For instance the tale of the world's creation and the
original heaven's destruction.

At first the cosmos was a universal heavy cloud with neither earth nor water. For
endless eons it swirled around until over time it precipitated as land and water and
massive sheets of snow and ice. More eons passed until an animal like a cow melted
out from the ice by rain and wind, a cow which could eat snow and drink water. It
licked at the glaciers covering the land and in time licked out shapes in the form of
human giants. They were strong but not very intelligent. Some time later she licked
out the true gods: Wotan the wise god who could write in runes and who had occult
knowledge; Thor the god of warriors and farmers, whose presence was announced by
thunder; Frey the god of plants and animals and host of living things as well as other
gods who all lived together in a great hall. Three other inhabitants of that world were
the Asgard serpent, whose body encircled the earth and whose movement created
earthquakes. There was also Fenris the wolf spirit, who had been captured by the
gods and was perpetually chained to a tree, and also an evil trickster god named Loki
who tirelessly attempted to foil the old gods.

These gods went through various adventures and drinking bouts together. They
were led sometimes by the senior god, Wotan, at other times by the warrior-farmer
god, Thor. All but one of these gods were almost immortal. Until one day a god who
was not too bright was persuaded by Loki to loose Fenris from his chains. When this
was done Fenris turned upon the old gods and began to slay them. The Asgard
serpent which circled the earth, chose this time to shake himself, which shook down
the hills and halls of Valhalla. Loki was killed by an old god but the attacks by Fenris
continued until he was finally killed by the single remaining god, Thor. However
Thor had been so badly wounded in this struggle that he soon perished. At this the
heavens collapsed upon themselves and Valhalla was no more.

This had all been predetermined to happen. Ragnarrock, the destruction of these
gods and their world was quite inevitable since it was fated to happen. Fate has no
sentiment and no morals, it simply works out what is predetermined to happen. It is the single unchangeable process of the heavens and earth.

A sky-towering ash tree known as Yggdrasil grows in the center of the world and in its branches and roots are all the living things on earth, from serpents to sparrows. At its foot are the three fates, women, one spinning the threads of lives, another weaving them into cloth, while the third cuts the cloth at various places ending the individuals' lives. They seem to be the ultimate determiners of what will happen but they too are determined by the actions of fate, which has no anthropomorphic or indeed any form.

In the roots of the Tree of LIfe, Yggdrasil, live a multitude of small human beings who at the death of the old gods issue forth and claim the world as their own. That, according to a much compressed version of a Norse creation tale, is how the world now inhabited by man came into being. It is not guaranteed to go on forever.

This creation tale strikes me as more moving than the one in the bible. There is no supreme creator god laying down the rules of what must and what must not be done. The gods finally have to make way for mankind and while in existence they don't intrude on the lives of humans. They also have no moral maxims to bandy about nor do they promise heaven or threaten hell to those who do or don't believe in them. They have no churches on earth, extract no contributions from their adherents and do not spin endless 'Thou shalt nots'.

**Bruno Lett's Homage to Forgotten Ancestors**

As an example of one tribute to the pagan peoples of old Europe consider a review of Bruno Lett's now largely forgotten *Homage to Forgotten Ancestors* (orig. 1896) reviewed in Jean O'Grady Weaver’s *No Redeeming Qualities* (1999: 64-69). O'Grady enthusiastically resurrects Bruno Lett's late 19th century tract which calls Christianity 'that pernicious Middle Eastern death cult'. However that old emigre writer did not let other religions off the hook simply because they were exotic. Despite his sometime glorification of the long rearguard struggle of the Latvian people who withstood three centuries of crusades launched against them by Catholic feudal lords, he basically presents an atheistic position of the late 19th century.

*Homage to Forgotten Ancestors* is in part a memorial to those peoples of old Europe who resisted the spread of Christianity and the autocracy which accompanied it. It is a tract which, strangely, pays tribute to European 'paganism', a term the author intends to imbue with honor. He holds that despite the serious failings of traditional European religions they once offered far greater freedom and human dignity than did Christianity.

Although Lett's bible punching has long since been anathema to respectable radicals it has an appealing ring to it. Few progressives foresaw the tenacious hold which organized religion, everywhere in the world, would have on humanity. Even fewer would have predicted the recrudescence of religion's dark powers, both at home and abroad, at the end of the twentieth century. During the last two to three generations the struggle to cast off supernatural chains has been largely lost by default. North American progressives became so attuned to building alliances and so concerned about social respectability that they suppressed their own historical understandings in order
to not offend supernatural beliefs. Today it is not thought remarkable to find leaders of a social democratic party castigate any of its members who reject claims that governmental legitimacy proceeds under some divine authority. 'Spirituality' of whatever kind and derivation is apparently beyond the pale of criticism. Such subservience is antithetical to earlier radical or simply secular convictions.

As a thoroughgoing atheist Lett had no interest in replacing adherence to Christianity with some pre-Christian folk religion. Despite his defence of European paganism his purpose has little in common with contemporary attempts to resurrect Stonehenge rites or sugary versions of Native American spirituality. Although he did not foresee it, it is fairly certain how Lett would have responded to the appeal of Asian mysticism and fundamentalist cults in America during our own time. Like most socialists of his time he was not indifferent to or quizzically tolerant of religion but saw it as a deadly plague.

_Forgotten Ancestors_ gives short shrift to functionalist apologetics and is quite cavalier in discounting the alleged benefits provided by religion(s) in various contexts. Nor does he demonstrate any esteem for folk magic or spirituality in general, phenomena which have become sacrosanct to many romantics. It is most refreshing to see such gushy obscurantism dismissed for what it is. His is a wonderfully old fashioned polemic.

"Looking back over eighteen centuries, one comes to the unalterable conclusion that Christianity was the greatest disaster to ever befall the peoples of Europe. No plague has been as long lasting, none has had such repugnant consequences as this oppressive ideology. Not the Black plague, not even the incursions of the Mongols were ultimately as destructive as the regimes established by Christian churches and rulers. The other plagues came and went or were dealt with in some way, but the yoke of Christianity remains to this very day" (Lett, 1976: 10).

The Christian bible is treated largely as a compendium of tribal chauvinism and glaring ignorance about the way things work in this world. It includes holy justifications for genocide and the complete annihilation of those defeated by that god's adherents. Despite many competitors the Old Testament remains the most blood thirsty and evil-promoting book in the entire western tradition. If indeed a god existed and the bible were his instructions to his adherents, it would be a moral imperative for decent humans to oppose such a god and to reject his murderous demands.

_Forgotten Ancestors_ is not merely anti-Christian but is opposed to all organized religions; it proffers no preference between those on offer, other than the pragmatic one that the weaker a church or sect is the less oppressive it usually can be. As a nineteenth century European Lett concerned himself primarily with the 'powers of darkness' which he knew first hand. But he did not accept the apologetics of other 'world religions' simply because they were exotic. Other peoples "... enmeshed in the coils of Islam or Judaism or the dominant religions of eastern Asia have a right
and a duty to reject their own priests and gods" (Lett, 1976: 24). It was requisite in this tradition to always write 'God' in lower case letters.

He notes that Christianity was simply one of many cults which circulated in the sect-ridden backlands of the Middle East during the final centuries of the Roman empire. It emerged from a population of detribalized shepherders who were so culturally backward that they hadn't even discovered the mechanism of where rain came from. This is a unpromising basis for a religion which claims to explain the world and humanity's place in it.

"The intellectual foundations of the civilized Mediterranean world, which the Christians set out to destroy, were far more sophisticated than that farrago of tribal fanaticism and Byzantine sophistry which Christianity soon became. Despite incorporating aspects of competing cults and of older religious beliefs Christianity has always retained its anti-human and absolutist core. Not even Tsarism at its worst ever attempted to control the universe of human thought and hope as completely as Christianity did. In distinction to the views of the civilized Mediterranean world Christianity committed its followers to a mindless dogma, as interpreted by a church hierarchy. For no good reason it prides itself on being a 'monotheistic' religion, with a god who seems to insist that the world and all in it should be one vast prison, in which the main role of mankind is to glorify him. What kind of people is it who create and then venerate a megalomaniac jailer as their god?" (Lett, 1976: 54).

The book goes on to note that tales of how the oppressed flocked to Christianity in search of spiritual liberation are simply fables. There is no evidence that the early Christians in the Roman/Byzantine Empire were from the oppressed strata. By the time Christianity became the state religion, in the fourth century A.D., its ranks were filled by shopkeepers, traders and petty state bureaucrats. Adherence to Christianity was voluntary only as long as the church did not have the power to impose it. Whenever the church had the means to do so Christianity was imposed upon all peoples within its reach. It was committed to the suppression of every other system of belief that it encountered and, to the world's loss, it largely succeeded in doing just that.

At some junctures Forgotten Ancestors detours into topics which only tangentially deal with the main theme but which illuminate the populist radicalism associated with Lett's secularism. For instance he comments on the collapse of the western Roman Empire (which by the fifth century A.D. was already largely Christian) and 'how it is portrayed in school book history'.

He notes that apologists of Christianity claim that it kept alive the light of civilization after the Roman empire was destroyed by barbarians. But what was Roman civilization to most of its subject peoples? It was comprised of military roads built by conscripted labor, of people enslaved to work Roman estates, of exactions by voracious tax collectors and the ravages of a Roman soldadeska. Roman civilization
was a system built on the subjugation of most peoples within the empire; that is the civilization which the church prides itself on helping to preserve.

"British squireens and their minions still [i.e. 1896] point to the glories of the Roman empire, which they see themselves as embodying in a new form. Schoolmasters and allied sitting room philosophers bewail the fate of empires when 'soft living and cheap bread' corrupts the masses. This refrain may be accompanied by a scene of Goths breaking down the defenses and drunkenly carousing on the Capitoline hill, urinating on the marble columns of the Roman Forum. Equally horrific is their picture of the Visigoth chieftain Alaric (410 A.D.) stabling his war horses in the chamber where Roman senators once held forth. 'The barbarians at the gate' ploy is always used to justify thinner beer, longer hours of work, and untrammeled powers by the lords of everything" (B. Lett, 1976: 57).

He holds that this is a refrain which has spread even to the Republic of these United States of America, where it is unthinkingly repeated by some whose parents or grandparents fled there to escape the demands of imperial rulers. For them, he says, 'let me suggest another view about barbarian horses and Roman senators.'

Lett notes that the first horse to enter the Roman Senate was Emperor Caligula's steed Incitatus, whom he raised to senatorial rank and had led into that august hall. The patrician senators received this addition to their ranks with offended but fawning acclaim. "But whatever legislative limitations Incitatus may have had he did not eat people, which is more than one can say for the slave-owning Roman senators. As for Alaric stabling his horses in the Senate Chamber, it seems to me that they were better occupants of that hall than most Roman senators ever were. At least the horses didn't initiate wars of conquest, they didn't enslave conquered peoples and they didn't exact an extortionate tribute from the empire's subjects" (Lett, B., 1976:59). Many peoples suffering under the Roman yoke must have felt similarly, he notes.

As for those barbarians committing brutal acts in the august precincts of Rome -- rapine and looting usually figure in this scenario -- yes, no doubt. But he asks "what do the schoolmasters think the Roman legions did in the regions they conquered?" No doubt many innocent Roman plebeians suffered for the crimes of their masters. But to "bewail the fact that some Roman autocrats, their bailiffs and their catamites, got a taste of what they had imposed on the world for so long is a 'tragedy' only in school books."

He says that after the barbarian chieftains became sufficiently strong they overrode the tribal checks and balances on their positions and made themselves into real kings. They then seized the opportunity offered by Christianity to secure their situation by adopting this religion and seeing to it that most of their followers did too.

“Sunday school stories portray the dissemination of Christianity borne forward by evangels of hope which supplanted the fearful superstitions of
pagan Europe. In reality, Christianity was spread mainly by fire and sword, by compulsion, regardless of any apostolic doctrines to the contrary. The Frankish king Charlemagne, a major culture hero of the early church and the first Holy Roman Emperor, consolidated his rule by imposing Christianity on his subjects and by exterminating those Saxons, men, women and children, who refused to reject their traditional beliefs. That is what 'spreading Christian civilization throughout heathen Europe' meant.'" (Lett, 1976: 160)

Lett apparently did not complete the series of books he intended to write, dealing with the other world religions. He seemingly slipped out of the historical record and himself became one of our own 'Forgotten Ancestors.'
CHAPTER 11

Some Reflective Remarks on Atheism

In a literal sense there is nothing which is sacred to atheists, if one means by 'sacred' something in some way 'supernatural'. Nothing which actually exists is supernatural. Although there are entities and processes we don't yet understand an atheistic approach presumes that when they are understood the explanations will entail purely materialistic entities and processes. Alleged explanations which include supernatural entities, assorted spirits, cultural mysteries and various spiritual legerdemain have never given any real answers whatsoever.

There are certain phenomena which many people treat as if they were 'sacred' in some way; one thinks of the American feelings about their nation's flag and how one should treat it, salute and honor it, never handle it disrespectfully. Others have quasi sacred sentiments about things such as some favored baseball team, a particularly moving piece of music and so forth. Patriotism is often a quasi-religious sentiment which has long been the preserve of neo conservatives and their allies.

Normally it is unprofitable to quibble with believers about their religious beliefs or about passages in their holy books, whether the Bible or any other sacred text. Maybe we should more often. But atheism has not normally been a missionary belief, its proponents have rarely been involved in attempts to convince others of the validity of their views. Possibly this is now changing, partly in response to the resurrection of religious fundamentalism and all the social evils it brings in its wake.

Many atheists have come to their view independently, sometimes after long consideration of the evidence for a god and his alleged commands. Often non-believing parents do not want to saddle their children with views which might be detrimental to them in school or in the future. This also may be beginning to change.

For about sixty years the Soviet Union was the single nation in the world which actively fostered a disbelief in any and all gods as well as all other supernatural beings. There was even a state-run institution whose purpose was to advance disbelief in religious practices, to dismiss the earthly powers of saints, holy icons and the other spiritual entities which had thriven in Tsarist Russia. For sixty years the Soviet Union maintained this institute whose purpose was to replace religion with an atheistic understanding of the world. It was pointed to by the pious outside that nation as an example of the totalitarian depths to which Russia had plunged. However to some of us it seemed like a noble undertaking, an attempt to break people free from the grasp of religion which has poisoned their lives for so long. This institute did not seem to have much dramatic success in forwarding atheism and opposing religion. However over the years of its existence it did witness the deChristianization of the bulk of the Soviet population, an achievement unmatched by any other human undertaking to date. The allegedly burgeoning Russian churches of today on closer inspection may not represent that much of an upsurge in holy belief.
Richard Dawkins notes that defenders of religion point out that the leading mass murderers of the 20th century were atheists: Hitler and Stalin as well as Mao Tse Tung. However he holds that there is no connection whatsoever between atheism and the deeds of those killers. There is nothing in an atheistic view which supports such actions -- nothing at all. Moreover if one considers the record of the alleged paragons of humanity (such as Winston Churchill or many rulers of the past) they too had very murderous records. And they are seen as repositories of Judeo-Christian virtue.

Dawkins emphatically notes that atheism is not in any way responsible for the evil individuals commit. None of such crimes were committed in the name of atheism and the conjunction of such deeds with atheism is a simple non sequitur (although a telling propagandistic ploy). The central fact is that atheism does not in any way constrain its proponents to commit such acts. However certain religious allegiances do direct their believers into committing murderous acts (Dawkins, R., 2006:272-273). The religious wars in Europe and the history of witch and heresy hunting by Christian churches unarguably bear this out. While it is true that atheism does not come with any morals attached, this cannot be said about the proponents of the world religions. Consider the genocidal murders glorified in the bible.

There are tens of millions of atheists in the world today and some of them do not demonstrate any particularly high degree of moral integrity or honesty. Nevertheless they are all fundamentally correct in their disbelief in the existence of god(s) whereas those who do believe in their existence are fundamentally mistaken, regardless of how decent or intelligent they are.

Believing or not believing in the existence of god(s) while partly a rational decision does not necessarily involve a weighing of all the evidence and arguments for his/their existence or non existence. I suspect that decisions about the non existence of god(s) come about somewhat like a revelation -- at some point the pieces all fit together and long standing puzzles are finally resolved. The understanding does not fundamentally stem from considering all the arguments and counter arguments for god's existence. His non existence is the only answer possible. Possibly some individuals become atheists through finding the promoters of god too loathsome and the injustices in the world too pervasive to permit the existence of any benign and all powerful god.

Whatever 'atheism' is or isn't it must be based on an exclusively materialist view of mankind and the cosmos. There is no room for spirits, souls, gods or devils, guardian angels, witches and spirit familiars or undetermined 'supernatural forces' in a materialist approach. Some commentators hold that materialism is a simple-minded approach which disregards and shucks off all the 'higher' and 'finer' factors in play when humans are involved. In part that is correct but a materialist approach is hardly simple minded. Materialist answers can be quite intricate analyses of human institutions. Idealist dismissals of materialism have been prevalent for centuries and are no more convincing than the spiritual entities they defend.

A materialist approach involves giving a priority to considering what people actually do during their lives rather than investigating their inner beliefs or the operation of some alleged 'cultural principles'. Once the nature of people’s daily lives
are considered in detail their overall strategies, whether successful or not, can often be seen in a more coherent light. Many traditional anthropological accounts, including those of religious belief, have been made more comprehensible when a detailed consideration of how people sustain themselves are carefully investigated.

In contrast, accounts which focus on the mental constructs and the desires of individuals or groups normally come to conclusions which are largely untestable and unprovable. People’s dreams and preferences can often be largely illusory. Indeed people can dream up social arrangements which are quite unworkable and can believe that certain processes are in operation when they definitely are not.

For some atheism is seen as a mark of the deepest evil, which will be punished by eternal damnation in the next world. Considering all those going to be cast into hell, hell must be a rather crowded place with all the assorted sinners, unbelievers, believers in false gods, etc. who were and will continue to be sent there. If you are a Christian fundamentalist you will be heartened to know that the souls of the overwhelming majority of humanity will reside down below not in the skies far above. Some Christian sects have even hazarded a prediction on how many souls will ultimately be saved -- some 144,000 according to one nineteenth century sect. One can imagine how unbearable it would be to be locked up with the likes of contemporary television evangelists for eternity. It seems to me that complete annihilation would be far preferable. Fortunately none of these threats are credible. There simply is no afterlife and no heaven or hell.

In regards to another point, there is fundamentally no correlation between atheism and any morality. Atheists can be libertarian or autocratic but their atheism does not legitimately partake in moral beliefs about the world and the people in it. It seems probable that the oppression supported by past religious institutions convinced some individuals to reject not just such oppression and its supporters but also the basic teachings of the religious orders involved. Even if an atheistic analysis only offers to disestablish the realm of the mythical that already is a considerable advance over religious fantasies.

We are repeatedly informed that religion sustains the moral order of the society it is part of. This claim presumes that the order being sustained is equitable and desirable when often that is clearly not true for many living in it. Protecting ‘morality’ for many fundamentalists is an attempt to prohibit much of what occurs in contemporary society. It involves appeals for tougher enforcement of extant laws and strengthening laws against any act or belief not biblically sanctioned. They call upon judges to dispense longer mandatory prison sentences, to build more jails filled with more prisoners and to withdraw the political rights of all those who in the past have been convicted of some offence or another. And, in America, to execute more prisoners for a wider variety of crimes. Some American states have already gone a long way in instituting such a prison society. Religious fundamentalism is often linked to a vicious police state mentality.

What is the relationship between socialism and atheism; is there any reason why an atheist should be a socialist or a supporter of the political left? Over the years I have come to recognize that there is no necessity for the two viewpoints to go
together. Indeed some currently prominent atheists are reactionaries of unalloyed American chauvinism. Atheism does not involve any politics or morality other than a disbelief in the existence of supernatural entities. Socialism however is a somewhat different matter. It seems to me that a belief in socialism contains an unspoken commitment to atheism -- that there are no gods and that no prayers, rituals or magical practices ever accomplish anything in the real world. A socialist viewpoint should not involve support for any religious beliefs. So, in short, atheism does not necessarily include a belief in socialism but true socialism does inherently involve an acceptance of atheism.

Just what support should one give atheism in a contest between a thoroughgoing atheist who is also a full blown reactionary and a firm Christian who is broadly progressive? In such a case one should have no hesitation in supporting the Christian despite his mistaken beliefs about the cosmos. Some atheists can be utter scum while many Christians hold quite enlightened attitudes about humanity. However, as noted earlier, good and evil are culturally relative evaluations and are not inherent in any specific deeds or allegiances.

In any case there is no morality involved in atheism, except the non-acceptance of supernatural entities and the claims they make on humans. Atheism is simply the correct way of understanding the world and the forces active in it.

What atheists are fundamentally concerned with is not truly answerable since their views and interests are highly variable. Atheists don't have what might be termed a distinguishable 'ideology'. Despite what I once believed, atheism is not confined to any particular political persuasion despite the fact that those of the political left were long its primary proponents. This is no longer the case. There are today conservative and arch reactionary atheists as well as others with a wide range of allegiances.

Richard Dawkins advances a common view about the non-provability/disprovability of god(s) but it does not make sense to me. Allegedly one cannot prove a negative statement. Why not? Because there are an infinity of unknown but possible forces and entities which just might exist somewhere in an infinity of situations. Really? But no one holds that because invisible, immaterial, polka dotted, cloud eating crocodiles cannot be proved to not exist in outer space that therefore they may be a force driving cosmic expansion. On the contrary, statements about the non-existence of specific phenomena are regularly made in science as elsewhere. Indeed, anyone believing in the possible existence of certain imaginable phenomena must be able to document their existence to be believed.

After thousands of years of religious disputations about the nature of god(s) and his/their demands there still is no meaningful evidence about his/their existence. Every sphere which once had been declared as responding to heavenly forces has fallen before scientific materialist explanation. The sphere of entities and forces which are said to be divinely directed has grown rather small -- every time something is held to be materially unexplainable it is not too long before it is explained or is found to be an illusory phenomena. Thousands of years is enough, is far too long, to await confirmation of immaterial entities which leave no observable trace of their
existence behind. If after prolonged investigation some claimed force or entity still cannot be detected then they simply do not exist --simple, adequate and conclusive.

Charles Templeton: A convert to sanity

Charles Templeton was a former evangelist preacher in the style of Billy Graham who had once packed the pews in Canada and the U.S. for almost twenty years. Beginning in the 1960's he began doubting the veracity of certain accounts in the bible and over some years wound up as a thorough unbeliever. A remarkable trajectory for one brought up in the faith and who had gained a certain eminence through his preaching. Templeton is an example of a prominent Christian who made the transition to something like atheism.

He tells us in his memoir (Farewell to God, 1999) that his initial disbelief in the inerrancy of the bible came from the accounts of the bloodlust and mass murder detailed in the old testament. It began with his disaffection with the alleged doings of the Hebrew god sending devastating famines, deadly plagues and finally the death to the first-born of all families in Egypt, from Pharaoh down to his slaves. Finally the Egyptians decided to expel the Israelites from their country and they left.

After years of trials and tribulations and massacres inflicted by the Exodus Jews on each other, they begin invading the lands of Canaan under the command of one Joshua. Yahweh had previously promised Moses,

"I will lead you to where the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites are. I will spread panic before you, I will make your enemies flee before you, I will exterminate them."

(Charles Templeton, 1999: 66-67)

Templeton goes through a list of the Canaanite towns destroyed and their inhabitants, male, female, and children plus their livestock, all killed.

First is the walled city of Jericho, possibly the oldest permanent settlement in the entire middle east. After a seven day siege Joshua has his sacred horns sound and the walls come tumbling down. Following that every living thing within the city is put to the sword and the city itself is burned to the ground. Next comes the city of Ai. After victory the Israelis kill every living being in the city but save all the gold, silver and bronze for their god's priests.

“There then is a succession of towns and cities which are sacked, looted and burned - each with the stipulation that all the gold and silver must be turned in to the earthly agents of god. The city of Gibeon, then on to Makkedah, where god delivered all its inhabitants into the hands of the Hebrew army which ‘struck every living creature with the edge of the sword’. This is also the fate of Libnah and then that of Lachish, where no living creature is left alive. The same happens to Horam and Eglon - not one person left alive after the Israeli army is through. Then on to
Hebron, a larger city which is put to the sword by Yahweh and his host. And finally at Debir where not one person is left alive. During this campaign one of the commanders permitted some nubile girls to remain alive for the enjoyment of their soldiers. When Yahweh learned of this he immediately ordered his generals to kill all living survivors as well as all their livestock - which the chastened Jewish soldiers immediately do." (C. Templeton, 1999: 73)

What ‘god's directions to his followers’ here means are the orders of the Jewish priests of the land, if it means anything at all. Surely this must be among the most vicious and murderous account of any group's conquest of others. It may simply be a founding myth, if so it is one of the most bloodthirsty in existence. One can rightly speak of a Canaanite Holocaust carried out by the Jews. Some recent archaeological investigations suggest that the Jewish tribes only gradually filtered into Canaan and gradually displaced the original inhabitants. But one should remember that for three thousand years the biblical accounts continued to be treated as the factual account of the deeds of the early Jews and their god.

Charles Templeton lived from 1915 to 2001. He grew up in Toronto the oldest son of an abandoned mother who ran a rooming house to make ends meet. Sometime in the early 1940s he developed a religious mania which propelled him into the Christian ministry and by the early 1950s he was presiding over large evangelical revival shindigs. He was a successful born-again evangelist for many years before gradually coming to reject the core beliefs of the bible, especially the old testament. Thereupon he left the church and turned to secular work for newspapers and other organizations. His is a rather uncommon example of a fundamentalist minister who gradually came to reject this message and over time became a non-believer in god.

Templeton inquires into the inanities of the old testament, noting that this god is extraordinarily vain and insists on being constantly worshipped and praised by the Jews. They must do this of their own free will but if they choose not to he casts them into a burning hell after death. Throughout the old testament he loads people with endless suffering unless they follow his ritualistic requirements exactly. Templeton holds

"... that the older god is inept, his master plan for Eden going awry almost immediately. He is unjust, he curses both man and woman and all their descendents for following their sexual nature, which he himself endowed them with. He is vindictive because he creates a painful child birth which is recurrent since both man and women are filled with natural lust and they are instructed by god to go forth and multiple and replenish the earth. That god is apparently not omniscient because in many places throughout the old testament things happen of which he is not aware until told. And he is not all powerful because after the six days in which he created the world and all on it, he was fatigued and had to rest a full day." (1999: 44-)
None of it makes sense, concludes Templeton. One may answer that it doesn't have to make sense, it's the bible. Believers may view all this as superfluous nitpicking but such internal contradictions and mass murders pervade the pages of the old testament.

As a summation Templeton says this,

“The Bible contains the thoughts of men, not the word of God, and we should approach it as we approach other extraordinary insights.

The idea of the Bible's divine authorship abandoned, one is able to accept or reject or adapt its teachings to our own time. Contemporary ethical questions can be examined on their merit, without trying to make them conform to an ancient world view. We are free to look at life without preconceptions and welcome what we find to be true, even if it runs counter to the teaching of the Bible or the church.” (1999: 142)

In the book's concluding pages Templeton outlines what he currently believes, which is very far removed from what he did as a Christian minister. A few of his current views are,

"I believe that there is no supreme being with human attributes, no God in the biblical sense, but that all life is the result of timeless evolutionary forces, having reached its present transient state over millions of years.

I believe that there is what may best be described as a Life Force, a First Cause, a Primal Energy, a Life Essence [but that] the Life Force is not 'a being'. It does not love nor can it be loved. It simply is.

I believe there is no Father in Heaven who can be persuaded by our prayers... that our world was born in infinite time and will, in its time, perish.

I believe that genus Homo is no more than the leading edge of the universal, evolutionary process on earth, but that he has more capacity for good and evil than any other creature. [Also] I believe that, because we have the ability to control our actions and to discriminate between what we understand to be good and bad, we are responsible for the way we live.”(1999: 232-233)

For a former fundamentalist minister his was a quite remarkable transition. He finally says that

"I believe that, in common with all living creatures, we die and cease to exist as an entity. And our nonexistent souls go nowhere after death, neither to a non existent heaven nor a hell.” (1999: 233)
Apart from the imputation of some originating 'life force' Templeton's viewpoint could easily be subsumed as atheist. It offers hope that at least some individuals can be rescued from a belief in the supernatural. It is a moving testimony.
CHAPTER 12

Final Comments

After more than two thousand years of propagating religious beliefs every possible argument for the existence of some divine being(s) has been raised, debated and then often largely forgotten. Silver tongued salesmen, wrathful heresy hunters, accomplished hacks and rationalizers of the impossible have all been heard from and their views expressed, with variable degrees of promise and threat. It is impossible to present a novel approach on this topic; however a simple repetition of them may have been of some value.

'Religion' as it was long dispensed had less to do with a belief in god(s) than it did with the defense of some given socio-political arrangements. That has probably always been the case. It applies both in advanced societies and in nations where twelfth century views predominate. The beliefs of the god-fearing deal with deeds done or not done in this world. They revolve around actions which occur in the present, however much they look back to the past.

As distinct from what I believed during much of my life, atheism does not necessarily entail any morality or philosophy other than a belief in the non existence of any gods, souls or other supernatural entities. An atheistic view may be held by those with completely opposed social and political commitments. It was the case historically that most atheists were on the political left and opposed to established state religions and the intellectual repression such arrangements normally entail. However both the defenders of human oppression and those who oppose them can both be atheists. Atheism does not come with any moral or political allegiances attached.

The charge that atheism is a nihilistic philosophy opposed to any and all morality whatsoever is simply a childish defamation. It is the response of simple minded propagandists and flows from a belief that all morals stem from god(s), usually a very particular god. If anything is nihilistic it is the view that the only valid code of conduct is that contained in the bible or in similar holy works. Such a belief apparently includes an acceptance of the bible’s final chapter, Revelations, which enthuses over the destruction of the world and all that is living on it by rampaging supernatural agents of death. Earth destroying monsters arise from the sea and the land to wreck havoc everywhere, heavenly angels open holy seals and deadly hosts emerge to destroy most of humanity. It is an account of apocalyptic madness, nothing could be more nihilistic.

Atheism is not based on any particular morality and in that it differs from religious beliefs, which clearly are so based. If that is so what benefits accrue from a disbelief in god? One fact which commends itself is that virtually all science above the mere collection and ordering of data is based upon an atheistic proposition. Any scientist who permits the actions of supernatural entities into explanations of natural
phenomena both invalidates such explanations and excludes himself as a reputable commentator on them. This is a simple yet necessary requirement for any scientific undertaking. To introduce supernatural forces or entities into a scientific explanation is comparable to saying that one does not know what forces are involved. Supernatural entities and forces are immeasurable, unknowable and unpredictable and therefore cannot serve as part of an explanation in any way. They are a non answer to any question.

Atheism historically opposed the at one time wide ranging religious restrictions on investigating natural phenomena. It may be that most early scientists were also believers in a god of some kind but they normally excluded his alleged actions in the phenomena they studied. For the purposes of their investigations god did not exist. They usually made various claims to a belief in the traditional god, as was necessary under the reigning political conditions. Such strictures only gradually gave way in the later nineteenth century.

In the social sphere atheists generally support roughly the same or a comparable morality as do many religious believers. This would seem to invalidate the proposition that our morality flows from religion. In fact accepted moral propositions emerged from assorted past beliefs, interests, and struggles of very diverse and only very partially religious origin.

Some hold that atheism provides a certain liberating view of life, although admittedly a thoroughgoing belief in a benign god can also permit people to feel free from everyday concerns. However atheism does free one from the fearful worries about an afterlife and the endless demands imposed by religion. Dismissing such demands may allow one to utilize one's life more fully than might otherwise be the case. Admittedly that is a debatable point. Holding an atheist view would have been a dangerous belief to maintain in the not so distant past (or even today in some regions). Moreover it appears that some individuals require belief in a personal and benignly authoritarian god in order to feel secure. That's fine, unless they attempt to impose their beliefs upon others.

Some of us have never believed in any supernatural entities whatsoever. But many intelligent individuals continue to believe in god's existence. How can that be? After all the suffering borne by humanity stemming from organized religion, to still believe in an omnipotent, omniscient and benign god? The existence of god(s) with limited powers in conjunction with other, sometimes conflicting, forces would be far more comprehensible. However with a god like the one proposed by Christianity, how can claims to his existence make sense in the face of human suffering?

One might hold that there is a moral obligation to not believe in or support such a god. For some, atheism demands something more than a simple non-belief in supernatural entities. At the very least it demands an open stand against all religious beliefs. Any other position may be a betrayal of the victims of religion's dark powers.

Certain atheists are wont to proclaim their admiration of the starry skies or the wonders of life on earth or the amazing intricacy of subatomic particles and the narrow limits of the fundamental physical forces which make the world as we know it possible. All without the intervention of any intelligible god. I suppose that such
feelings about the universe are quite admirable, however none of this is involved in my own atheism. It seems to me that sentiments which involve a worshipful appreciation of the intricacies of the universe verge on the theistic and are to be discouraged. Maybe I'm wrong there.

My own disbelief in supernatural claims was initially related to Christianity, which was the only religion I knew of. It was a view which descended from my mother's grandmother's generation in the 1850s and I have never found any reason to doubt it. But as my knowledge broadened this rejection attached itself to all other religious entities and practices I learned of. If that is a faith then it is one based on active rejection of all supernatural claims put forward. This view sometimes approaches an active hostility rather than mere indifference toward religious claims.

One consequence was that I steadfastly refused to ever read the bible or any other holy text. I also managed to immediately forget all the bible readings and morning prayers which were forced down our throats daily in public school. This may seem a rather unpropitious background for someone intending to write about religion and belief in the supernatural. However the arguments about the non existence of supernatural entities stand on their own and their validity does not depend upon the background of the person making them.

The above attitude also flies in the face of certain anthropological maxims. For instance that one must get to know a society or a belief system from the inside, by accepting its beliefs and practices, before one can understand it. 'You must think like an Arunta before you can claim to know them', some held. I don't believe that and I don't think that it is possible in any case. For many years I worked as an anthropologist, operating in a discipline in which the supernatural beliefs of sundry peoples are of considerable importance. However it seems to me that to understand social institutions one must refrain from accepting the practices and beliefs of those one is studying. Instead one should carefully consider the bases and consequences of such beliefs, which are not necessarily obvious. One does not understand the nature of psychosis by becoming a psychotic. Religions are often tenacious belief systems and one can not understand their nature by simply accepting the beliefs they entail.

After two thousand years of faith-creating and faith-peddling organizations, after the efforts of multi-millions of priests, rabbis, imams, whirling dervishes, and snake handling gospelers, none have ever produced any plausible evidence to believe in the existence of god(s). None at all. Less than nothing.

All the pontificating and theologizing with no even vaguely plausible proof seems long enough to answer the question of the existence of a god. Far too long, in fact. We should dispense with godly fantasy beings and their alleged commandments to humans. In the last few centuries an initially small but growing vanguard of humans have acquired an incomparable treasure trove of scientific explanations of natural processes, most of which was never even guessed at by religion. Throughout its history organized religion generally attempted to dismiss any fuller understanding of the world around and within us. Religion is and always was the backstop of know-nothingism, slathered over with high sounding phrases about moral duties and non existent sky fairies.
It is true that some contemporary scientists hold something which they claim to be 'religious belief'. However, if such beliefs conflict with their material findings and tests then the religious predilections must go out the window, at least on the topic under consideration, or they will cease to be scientists and become simple religious propagandists. Religion (as opposed to some of the religious) has never added one iota to the understanding of the real world.

To repeat, there has never been any believable evidence given for the existence of any gods or goddesses, not all-powerful ones nor three in one gods, not elephant-headed gods nor rain and lightning embodying ones, nor sea dwelling or heaven based gods, none whatsoever. Nor has there ever been one iota of evidence for the existence of devils or other mythical beings of supernatural evil. These are all simply human fabrications, allegories at best. But do people pray to allegories and expect their prayers to be answered? Yes, a great many do.

Theologians to the contrary, there never has been the slightest factual basis for a belief in souls, witches, disembodied or embodied spirits, ghosts or anything supernatural whatsoever. This includes the wide roster of spiritual entities sustained by tribal religions. They are all human fabrications.

There are theological questions about the knowability of god. On the one hand he is believed to be, along with being immortal, benign, immaterial etc. etc. but also to be ultimately unknowable by mere mortals. All right, fine. But if he is beyond human understanding how do we know what his wishes and demands are and why should we follow them if we do know? Well, by speaking through human agents he has issued commands which are highly specific. But how often are they correctly interpreted or understood by his messengers? Why would anyone believe that a coven of illiterate raving prophets from bands of bloodthirsty pastoralists understood the creator of the universe to be and what his demands are? Because the bible tells you so. Well It may tell you so but I don't believe a word of it. It was produced by the same fantasists as those it validates.

There are skilled tricksters, fast talking philosophes and 'interpreters' who can weave convincing arguments about the existence of supernatural entities and there are also the gullible who believe them. No doubt there are some who would believe arguments for the existence of some Great Flying Spaghetti Monster and our duty to worship him. The real question is why normally intelligent individuals believe such god pedlars and the supernatural entities they promote.

Some commentators are wont to use a formulation about 'the probable nonexistence of god.' Even Richard Dawkins, that eminent and elegant nonbelieving biologist, claims that "we can not ultimately prove the non existence of god" but then goes on to thoroughly debunk the arguments for the existence of one (The God Delusion, Dawkins, R. 2006). But believers typically have their claims embedded in certain material consequences of god's existence and these are definitely testable and deniable. Arguments for a god who has no material consequences whatsoever are rare indeed.

Atheism dismisses the 'probable', 'likely', 'it would seem' qualifiers about the existence/nonexistence of god(s.) The reason is the same as to why atheists are not
agnostics -- we hold that the arguments have been going on for far too long and that no religion has ever provided any significant or believable evidence for the existence of any supernatural entities at any time, anywhere. Moreover we do not believe that there are any truly beneficial social consequences maintained by religious belief. The evil consequences of belief in gods are far too common to permit them any support. In short, we have heard enough of the arguments for the existence of god(s) and other spiritual forces and find none of them convincing.

At some point one should come to a decision about what exists and what does not. After all we do not leave open the possibility that there are physically undetectable flying purple crocodiles that exhale anti-gravity forces in the distant realms of the universe which, while undetectable themselves, answer certain contemporary cosmological questions. It is far better to simply say that we do not yet understand how apparent 'anti-gravity forces' operate rather than attributing them to some unknown process or entity.

It is in no way advantageous to propose the existence of entities for which we have no observable evidence. Although there is probably much in the universe of which we do not yet know these definitely do not include supernatural forces.

Some commentators hold variants of the view that since there is no way to prove the non existence of god then, presto-chango, the probability of his existing is at least as great as his non existence. What sort of nonsense is that? Either we have some evidence for his existence or we don't. If we don't why would anyone claim that his existence is equally probable to his non existence. The roster of things which humans can imagine but have no evidence for existing is endless. There may be many things which exist that humans do not yet know of. However these will not prove to be examples of mind over matter or of the operation of spiritual entities.

Some may hold that 'God is constituted of qualities and forces which our meagre human minds cannot possibly conceive.' Alright, if one can't conceive of him then let no one go around ordaining what he/they want or demand or promise humans. Let us continue investigating phenomena of which we can potentially know something and which have a bearing on answerable questions. The insights gained by science over the past 200 years have been and continue to be so amazing as to fulfill anyone's desire for a deeper understanding of this world and the cosmos of which we are a part. Whereas the frontiers of science have bounded ahead so rapidly as to often become unfathomable to many, theology has stood still and been engaged in endless rounds of repetitive debate which barely covers its threadbare figure.

That from a mass of doctrinal hair splitting there could arise, first slowly but then with increasing intensity, an upwelling of scientific understanding about the world is probably the most miraculous and heartening development in the last two millennia. Belief in the supernatural opens the door to imaginary gods and demons, as it does to the self-styled dragon slayers who have bedeviled mankind from the dawn of history. The intellectual advances humans have made is today under attack by rabid religiosity almost everywhere. It is conceivable that we are in for another dark night of mindless belief rather than a new dawn of knowledge which once seemed
assured. Those who value a secular world should defend their allegiances to it in the face of resurgent religious claims. I hope we will.

End
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