

# CHAPTER 1

## A deeply religious non-believer

*I don't try to imagine a personal God; it suffices to stand in awe at the structure of the world, insofar as it allows our inadequate senses to appreciate it.*

ALBERT EINSTEIN

## DESERVED RESPECT

The boy lay prone in the grass, his chin resting on his hands. He suddenly found himself overwhelmed by a heightened awareness of the tangled stems and roots, a forest in microcosm, a transfigured world of ants and beetles and even - though he wouldn't have known the details at the time - of soil bacteria by the billions, silently and invisibly shoring up the economy of the micro-world. Suddenly the micro-forest of the turf seemed to swell and become one with the universe, and with the rapt mind of the boy contemplating it. He interpreted the experience in religious terms and it led him eventually to the priesthood. He was ordained an Anglican priest and became a chaplain at my school, a teacher of whom I was fond. It is thanks to decent liberal clergymen like him that nobody could ever claim that I had religion forced down my throat.\*

In another time and place, that boy could have been me under the stars, dazzled by Orion, Cassiopeia and Ursa Major, tearful with the unheard music of the Milky Way, heady with the night scents of frangipani and trumpet flowers in an African garden. Why the same emotion should have led my chaplain in one direction and me in the other is not an easy question to answer. A quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists. It has no connection with supernatural belief. In his boyhood at least, my chaplain was presumably not aware (nor was I) of the closing lines of *The Origin of Species* - the famous 'entangled bank' passage, 'with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth'. Had he been, he would certainly have identified with it and, instead of the priesthood, might have been led to Darwin's view that all was 'produced by laws acting around us':

\* Our sport during lessons was to sidetrack him away from scripture and towards stirring tales of Fighter Command and the Few. He had done war service in the RAF and it was with familiarity, and something of the affection that I still retain for the Church of England (at least by comparison with the competition), that I later read John Betjeman's poem:

Our padre is an old sky pilot,  
Severely now they've clipped his wings,  
But still the flagstaff in the Rect'ry garden  
Points to Higher Things . . .

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

Carl Sagan, in *Pale Blue Dot*, wrote:

How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, 'This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant'? Instead they say, 'No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way.' A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths.

All Sagan's books touch the nerve-endings of transcendent wonder that religion monopolized in past centuries. My own books have the same aspiration. Consequently I hear myself often described as a deeply religious man. An American student wrote to me that she had asked her professor whether he had a view about me. 'Sure,' he replied. 'He's positive science is incompatible with religion, but he waxes ecstatic about nature and the universe. To me, that *is* religion!' But is 'religion' the right word? I don't think so. The Nobel Prize-winning physicist (and atheist) Steven Weinberg made the point as well as anybody, in *Dreams of a Final Theory*:

Some people have views of God that are so broad and flexible that it is inevitable that they will find God wherever they look for him. One hears it said that 'God is the ultimate' or 'God is our better nature' or 'God is the

universe.' Of course, like any other word, the word 'God' can be given any meaning we like. If you want to say that 'God is energy,' then you can find God in a lump of coal.

Weinberg is surely right that, if the word God is not to become completely useless, it should be used in the way people have generally understood it: to denote a supernatural creator that is 'appropriate for us to worship'.

Much unfortunate confusion is caused by failure to distinguish what can be called Einsteinian religion from supernatural religion. Einstein sometimes invoked the name of God (and he is not the only atheistic scientist to do so), inviting misunderstanding by supernaturalists eager to misunderstand and claim so illustrious a thinker as their own. The dramatic (or was it mischievous?) ending of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, 'For then we should know the mind of God', is notoriously misconstrued. It has led people to believe, mistakenly of course, that Hawking is a religious man. The cell biologist Ursula Goodenough, in *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, sounds more religious than Hawking or Einstein. She loves churches, mosques and temples, and numerous passages in her book fairly beg to be taken out of context and used as ammunition for supernatural religion. She goes so far as to call herself a 'Religious Naturalist'. Yet a careful reading of her book shows that she is really as staunch an atheist as I am.

'Naturalist' is an ambiguous word. For me it conjures my childhood hero, Hugh Lofting's Doctor Dolittle (who, by the way, had more than a touch of the 'philosopher' naturalist of HMS *Beagle* about him). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, naturalist meant what it still means for most of us today: a student of the natural world. Naturalists in this sense, from Gilbert White on, have often been clergymen. Darwin himself was destined for the Church as a young man, hoping that the leisurely life of a country parson would enable him to pursue his passion for beetles. But philosophers use 'naturalist' in a very different sense, as the opposite of *supernaturalist*. Julian Baggini explains in *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* the meaning of an atheist's commitment to naturalism: 'What most atheists do believe is that although there is

only one kind of stuff in the universe and it is physical, out of this stuff come minds, beauty, emotions, moral values - in short the full gamut of phenomena that gives richness to human life.'

Human thoughts and emotions *emerge* from exceedingly complex interconnections of physical entities within the brain. An atheist in this sense of philosophical naturalist is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no *supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles - except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don't yet understand. If there is something that appears to lie beyond the natural world as it is now imperfectly understood, we hope eventually to understand it and embrace it within the natural. As ever when we unweave a rainbow, it will not become less wonderful.

Great scientists of our time who sound religious usually turn out not to be so when you examine their beliefs more deeply. This is certainly true of Einstein and Hawking. The present Astronomer Royal and President of the Royal Society, Martin Rees, told me that he goes to church as an 'unbelieving Anglican . . . out of loyalty to the tribe'. He has no theistic beliefs, but shares the poetic naturalism that the cosmos provokes in the other scientists I have mentioned. In the course of a recently televised conversation, I challenged my friend the obstetrician Robert Winston, a respected pillar of British Jewry, to admit that his Judaism was of exactly this character and that he didn't really believe in anything supernatural. He came close to admitting it but shied at the last fence (to be fair, he was supposed to be interviewing me, not the other way around).<sup>3</sup> When I pressed him, he said he found that Judaism provided a good discipline to help him structure his life and lead a good one. Perhaps it does; but that, of course, has not the smallest bearing on the truth value of any of its supernatural claims. There are many intellectual atheists who proudly call themselves Jews and observe Jewish rites, perhaps out of loyalty to an ancient tradition or to murdered relatives, but also because of a confused and confusing willingness to label as 'religion' the pantheistic reverence which many of us share with its most distinguished exponent, Albert Einstein. They may not believe but, to borrow Dan Dennett's phrase, they 'believe in belief'.<sup>4</sup>

One of Einstein's most eagerly quoted remarks is 'Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.' But Einstein also said,

It was, of course, a lie what you read about my religious convictions, a lie which is being systematically repeated. I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.

Does it seem that Einstein contradicted himself? That his words can be cherry-picked for quotes to support both sides of an argument? No. By 'religion' Einstein meant something entirely different from what is conventionally meant. As I continue to clarify the distinction between supernatural religion on the one hand and Einsteinian religion on the other, bear in mind that I am calling only *supernatural* gods delusional.

Here are some more quotations from Einstein, to give a flavour of Einsteinian religion.

I am a deeply religious nonbeliever. This is a somewhat new kind of religion.

I have never imputed to Nature a purpose or a goal, or anything that could be understood as anthropomorphic. What I see in Nature is a magnificent structure that we can comprehend only very imperfectly, and that must fill a thinking person with a feeling of humility. This is a genuinely religious feeling that has nothing to do with mysticism.

The idea of a personal God is quite alien to me and seems even naive.

In greater numbers since his death, religious apologists understandably try to claim Einstein as one of their own. Some of his religious contemporaries saw him very differently. In 1940 Einstein

wrote a famous paper justifying his statement 'I do not believe in a personal God.' This and similar statements provoked a storm of letters from the religiously orthodox, many of them alluding to Einstein's Jewish origins. The extracts that follow are taken from Max Jammer's book *Einstein and Religion* (which is also my main source of quotations from Einstein himself on religious matters). The Roman Catholic Bishop of Kansas City said: 'It is sad to see a man, who comes from the race of the Old Testament and its teaching, deny the great tradition of that race.' Other Catholic clergymen chimed in: 'There is no other God but a personal God . . . Einstein does not know what he is talking about. He is all wrong. Some men think that because they have achieved a high degree of learning in some field, they are qualified to express opinions in all.' The notion that religion is a proper *field*, in which one might claim *expertise*, is one that should not go unquestioned. That clergyman presumably would not have deferred to the expertise of a claimed 'fairyologist' on the exact shape and colour of fairy wings. Both he and the bishop thought that Einstein, being theologically untrained, had misunderstood the nature of God. On the contrary, Einstein understood very well exactly what he was denying.

An American Roman Catholic lawyer, working on behalf of an ecumenical coalition, wrote to Einstein:

We deeply regret that you made your statement . . . in which you ridicule the idea of a personal God. In the past ten years nothing has been so calculated to make people think that Hitler had some reason to expel the Jews from Germany as your statement. Conceding your right to free speech, I still say that your statement constitutes you as one of the greatest sources of discord in America.

A New York rabbi said: 'Einstein is unquestionably a great scientist, but his religious views are diametrically opposed to Judaism.'

'But'? '*But*'? Why not 'and'?

The president of a historical society in New Jersey wrote a letter that so damningly exposes the weakness of the religious mind, it is worth reading twice:

We respect your learning, Dr Einstein; but there is one thing you do not seem to have learned: that God is a spirit and cannot be found through the telescope or microscope, no more than human thought or emotion can be found by analyzing the brain. As everyone knows, religion is based on Faith, not knowledge. Every thinking person, perhaps, is assailed at times with religious doubt. My own faith has wavered many a time. But I never told anyone of my spiritual aberrations for two reasons: (1) I feared that I might, by mere suggestion, disturb and damage the life and hopes of some fellow being; (2) because I agree with the writer who said, 'There is a mean streak in anyone who will destroy another's faith.' ... I hope, Dr Einstein, that you were misquoted and that you will yet say something more pleasing to the vast number of the American people who delight to do you honor.

What a devastatingly revealing letter! Every sentence drips with intellectual and moral cowardice.

Less abject but more shocking was the letter from the Founder of the Calvary Tabernacle Association in Oklahoma:

Professor Einstein, I believe that every Christian in America will answer you, 'We will not give up our belief in our God and his son Jesus Christ, but we invite you, if you do not believe in the God of the people of this nation, to go back where you came from.' I have done everything in my power to be a blessing to Israel, and then you come along and with one statement from your blasphemous tongue, do more to hurt the cause of your people than all the efforts of the Christians who love Israel can do to stamp out anti-Semitism in our land. Professor Einstein, every Christian in America will immediately reply to you, 'Take your crazy, fallacious theory of evolution and go back to Germany where you came from, or stop trying to break down the faith of a people who gave you a welcome when you were forced to flee your native land.'



The one thing all his theistic critics got right was that Einstein was not one of them. He was repeatedly indignant at the suggestion that he was a theist. So, was he a deist, like Voltaire and Diderot? Or a pantheist, like Spinoza, whose philosophy he admired: 'I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of human beings'?

Let's remind ourselves of the terminology. A theist believes in a supernatural intelligence who, in addition to his main work of creating the universe in the first place, is still around to oversee and influence the subsequent fate of his initial creation. In many theistic belief systems, the deity is intimately involved in human affairs. He answers prayers; forgives or punishes sins; intervenes in the world by performing miracles; frets about good and bad deeds, and knows when we do them (or even *think* of doing them). A deist, too, believes in a supernatural intelligence, but one whose activities were confined to setting up the laws that govern the universe in the first place. The deist God never intervenes thereafter, and certainly has no specific interest in human affairs. Pantheists don't believe in a supernatural God at all, but use the word God as a non-supernatural synonym for Nature, or for the Universe, or for the lawfulness that governs its workings. Deists differ from theists in that their God does not answer prayers, is not interested in sins or confessions, does not read our thoughts and does not intervene with capricious miracles. Deists differ from pantheists in that the deist God is some kind of cosmic intelligence, rather than the pantheist's metaphoric or poetic *synonym* for the laws of the universe. Pantheism is sexed-up atheism. Deism is watered-down theism.

There is every reason to think that famous Einsteinisms like 'God is subtle but he is not malicious' or 'He does not play dice' or 'Did God have a choice in creating the Universe?' are pantheistic, not deistic, and certainly not theistic. 'God does not play dice' should be translated as 'Randomness does not lie at the heart of all things.' 'Did God have a choice in creating the Universe?' means 'Could the universe have begun in any other way?' Einstein was using 'God' in a purely metaphorical, poetic sense. So is Stephen Hawking, and so are most of those physicists who occasionally slip

into the language of religious metaphor. Paul Davies's *The Mind of God* seems to hover somewhere between Einsteinian pantheism and an obscure form of deism - for which he was rewarded with the Templeton Prize (a very large sum of money given annually by the Templeton Foundation, usually to a scientist who is prepared to say something nice about religion).

Let me sum up Einsteinian religion in one more quotation from Einstein himself: 'To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness. In this sense I am religious.' In this sense I too am religious, with the reservation that 'cannot grasp' does not have to mean 'forever ungraspable'. But I prefer not to call myself religious because it is misleading. It is destructively misleading because, for the vast majority of people, 'religion' implies 'supernatural'. Carl Sagan put it well: '. . . if by "God" one means the set of physical laws that govern the universe, then clearly there is such a God. This God is emotionally unsatisfying . . . it does not make much sense to pray to the law of gravity.'

Amusingly, Sagan's last point was foreshadowed by the Reverend Dr Fulton J. Sheen, a professor at the Catholic University of America, as part of a fierce attack upon Einstein's 1940 disavowal of a personal God. Sheen sarcastically asked whether anyone would be prepared to lay down his life for the Milky Way. He seemed to think he was making a point against Einstein, rather than\* for him, for he added: 'There is only one fault with his cosmical religion: he put an extra letter in the word - the letter "s".' There is nothing comical about Einstein's beliefs. Nevertheless, I wish that physicists would refrain from using the word God in their special metaphorical sense. The metaphorical or pantheistic God of the physicists is light years away from the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs and rabbis, and of ordinary language. Deliberately to confuse the two is, in my opinion, an act of intellectual high treason.

## UNDESERVED RESPECT

My title, *The God Delusion*, does not refer to the God of Einstein and the other enlightened scientists of the previous section. That is why I needed to get Einsteinian religion out of the way to begin with: it has a proven capacity to confuse. In the rest of this book I am talking only about *supernatural* gods, of which the most familiar to the majority of my readers will be Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. I shall come to him in a moment. But before leaving this preliminary chapter I need to deal with one more matter that would otherwise bedevil the whole book. This time it is a matter of etiquette. It is possible that religious readers will be offended by what I have to say, and will find in these pages insufficient *respect* for their own particular beliefs (if not the beliefs that others treasure). It would be a shame if such offence prevented them from reading on, so I want to sort it out here, at the outset.

A widespread assumption, which nearly everybody in our society accepts - the non-religious included - is that religious faith is especially vulnerable to offence and should be protected by an abnormally thick wall of respect, in a different class from the respect that any human being should pay to any other. Douglas Adams put it so well, in an impromptu speech made in Cambridge shortly before his death,<sup>5</sup> that I never tire of sharing his words:

Religion . . . has certain ideas at the heart of it which we call sacred or holy or whatever. What it means is, 'Here is an idea or a notion that you're not allowed to say anything bad about; you're just not. Why not? - because you're not!' If somebody votes for a party that you don't agree with, you're free to argue about it as much as you like; everybody will have an argument but nobody feels aggrieved by it. If somebody thinks taxes should go up or down you are free to have an argument about it. But on the other hand if somebody says 'I mustn't move a light switch on a Saturday', you say, 'I *respect* that'.

Why should it be that it's perfectly legitimate to support the Labour party or the Conservative party, Republicans or Democrats, this model of economics versus that,

Macintosh instead of Windows - but to have an opinion about how the Universe began, about who created the Universe . . . no, that's holy? . . . We are used to not challenging religious ideas but it's very interesting how much of a furore Richard creates when he does it! Everybody gets absolutely frantic about it because you're not allowed to say these things. Yet when you look at it rationally there is no reason why those ideas shouldn't be as open to debate as any other, except that we have agreed somehow between us that they shouldn't be.

Here's a particular example of our society's overweening respect for religion, one that really matters. By far the easiest grounds for gaining conscientious objector status in wartime are religious. You can be a brilliant moral philosopher with a prizewinning doctoral thesis expounding the evils of war, and still be given a hard time by a draft board evaluating your claim to be a conscientious objector. Yet if you can say that one or both of your parents is a Quaker you sail through like a breeze, no matter how inarticulate and illiterate you may be on the theory of pacifism or, indeed, Quakerism itself.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from pacifism, we have a pusillanimous reluctance to use religious names for warring factions. In Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants are euphemized to 'Nationalists' and 'Loyalists' respectively. The very word 'religions' is bowdlerized to 'communities', as in 'inter-community warfare'. Iraq, as a consequence of the Anglo-American invasion of 2003, degenerated into sectarian civil war between Sunni and Shia Muslims. Clearly a religious conflict - yet in the *Independent* of 20 May 2006 the front-page headline and first leading article both described it as 'ethnic cleansing'. 'Ethnic' in this context is yet another euphemism. What we are seeing in Iraq is religious cleansing. The original usage of 'ethnic cleansing' in the former Yugoslavia is also arguably a euphemism for religious cleansing, involving Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosnians.<sup>6</sup>

I have previously drawn attention to the privileging of religion in public discussions of ethics in the media and in government.<sup>7</sup> Whenever a controversy arises over sexual or reproductive morals,

you can bet that religious leaders from several different faith groups will be prominently represented on influential committees, or on panel discussions on radio or television. I'm not suggesting that we should go out of our way to censor the views of these people. But why does our society beat a path to their door, as though they had some expertise comparable to that of, say, a moral philosopher, a family lawyer or a doctor?

Here's another weird example of the privileging of religion. On 21 February 2006 the United States Supreme Court ruled that a church in New Mexico should be exempt from the law, which everybody else has to obey, against the taking of hallucinogenic drugs.<sup>8</sup> Faithful members of the Centro Espirita Beneficiente Uniao do Vegetal believe that they can understand God only by drinking hoasca tea, which contains the illegal hallucinogenic drug dimethyl-tryptamine. Note that it is sufficient that they *believe* that the drug enhances their understanding. They do not have to produce evidence. Conversely, there is plenty of evidence that cannabis eases the nausea and discomfort of cancer sufferers undergoing chemotherapy. Yet the Supreme Court ruled, in 2005, that all patients who use cannabis for medicinal purposes are vulnerable to federal prosecution (even in the minority of states where such specialist use is legalized). Religion, as ever, is the trump card. Imagine members of an art appreciation society pleading in court that they 'believe' they need a hallucinogenic drug in order to enhance their understanding of Impressionist or Surrealist paintings. Yet, when a church claims an equivalent need, it is backed by the highest court in the land. Such is the power of religion as a talisman.

Seventeen years ago, I was one of thirty-six writers and artists commissioned by the magazine *New Statesman* to write in support of the distinguished author Salman Rushdie,<sup>9</sup> then under sentence of death for writing a novel. Incensed by the 'sympathy' for Muslim 'hurt' and 'offence' expressed by Christian leaders and even some secular opinion-formers, I drew the following parallel:

If the advocates of apartheid had their wits about them they would claim - for all I know truthfully - that allowing mixed races is against their religion. A good part of

the opposition would respectfully tiptoe away. And it is no use claiming that this is an unfair parallel because apartheid has no rational justification. The whole point of religious faith, its strength and chief glory, is that it does not depend on rational justification. The rest of us are expected to defend our prejudices. But ask a religious person to justify their faith and you infringe 'religious liberty'.

Little did I know that something pretty similar would come to pass in the twenty-first century. The *Los Angeles Times* (10 April 2006) reported that numerous Christian groups on campuses around the United States were suing their universities for enforcing anti-discrimination rules, including prohibitions against harassing or abusing homosexuals. As a typical example, in 2004 James Nixon, a twelve-year-old boy in Ohio, won the right in court to wear a T-shirt to school bearing the words 'Homosexuality is a sin, Islam is a lie, abortion is murder. Some issues are just black and white!'<sup>10</sup> The school told him not to wear the T-shirt - and the boy's parents sued the school. The parents might have had a conscionable case if they had based it on the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech. But they didn't: indeed, they couldn't, because free speech is deemed not to include 'hate speech'. But hate only has to prove it is *religious*, and it no longer counts as hate. So, instead of freedom of speech, the Nixons' lawyers appealed to the constitutional right to freedom of *religion*. Their victorious lawsuit was supported by the Alliance Defense Fund of Arizona, whose business it is to 'press the legal battle for religious freedom'.

The Reverend Rick Scarborough, supporting the wave of similar Christian lawsuits brought to establish religion as a legal justification for discrimination against homosexuals and other groups, has named it the civil rights struggle of the twenty-first century: 'Christians are going to have to take a stand for the right to be Christian.'<sup>11</sup> Once again, if such people took their stand on the right to free speech, one might reluctantly sympathize. But that isn't what it is about. The legal case in favour of discrimination against homosexuals is being mounted as a counter-suit against alleged religious discrimination! And the law seems to respect this. You

can't get away with saying, 'If you try to stop me from insulting homosexuals it violates my freedom of prejudice.' But you can get away with saying, 'It violates my freedom of religion.' What, when you think about it, is the difference? Yet again, religion trumps all.

I'll end the chapter with a particular case study, which tellingly illuminates society's exaggerated respect for religion, over and above ordinary human respect. The case flared up in February 2006 - a ludicrous episode, which veered wildly between the extremes of comedy and tragedy. The previous September, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published twelve cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. Over the next three months, indignation was carefully and systematically nurtured throughout the Islamic world by a small group of Muslims living in Denmark, led by two imams who had been granted sanctuary there.<sup>12</sup> In late 2005 these malevolent exiles travelled from Denmark to Egypt bearing a dossier, which was copied and circulated from there to the whole Islamic world, including, importantly, Indonesia. The dossier contained falsehoods about alleged maltreatment of Muslims in Denmark, and the tendentious lie that *Jyllands-Posten* was a government-run newspaper. It also contained the twelve cartoons which, crucially, the imams had supplemented with three additional images whose origin was mysterious but which certainly had no connection with Denmark. Unlike the original twelve, these three add-ons were genuinely offensive - or would have been if they had, as the zealous propagandists alleged, depicted Muhammad. A particularly damaging one of these three was not a cartoon at all but a faxed photograph of a bearded man wearing a fake pig's snout held on with elastic. It has subsequently turned out that this was an Associated Press photograph of a Frenchman entered for a pig-squealing contest at a country fair in France.<sup>13</sup> The photograph had no connection whatsoever with the prophet Muhammad, no connection with Islam, and no connection with Denmark. But the Muslim activists, on their mischief-stirring hike to Cairo, implied all three connections . . . with predictable results.

The carefully cultivated 'hurt' and 'offence' was brought to an explosive head five months after the twelve cartoons were originally published. Demonstrators in Pakistan and Indonesia burned Danish flags (where did they get them from?) and hysterical

demands were made for the Danish government to apologize. (Apologize for what? They didn't draw the cartoons, or publish them. Danes just live in a country with a free press, something that people in many Islamic countries might have a hard time understanding.) Newspapers in Norway, Germany, France and even the United States (but, conspicuously, not Britain) reprinted the cartoons in gestures of solidarity with *Jyllands-Posten*, which added fuel to the flames. Embassies and consulates were trashed, Danish goods were boycotted, Danish citizens and, indeed, Westerners generally, were physically threatened; Christian churches in Pakistan, with no Danish or European connections at all, were burned. Nine people were killed when Libyan rioters attacked and burned the Italian consulate in Benghazi. As Germaine Greer wrote, what these people really love and do best is pandemonium.<sup>14</sup>

A bounty of \$1 million was placed on the head of 'the Danish cartoonist' by a Pakistani imam - who was apparently unaware that there were twelve different Danish cartoonists, and almost certainly unaware that the three most offensive pictures had never appeared in Denmark at all (and, by the way, where was that million going to come from?). In Nigeria, Muslim protesters against the Danish cartoons burned down several Christian churches, and used machetes to attack and kill (black Nigerian) Christians in the streets. One Christian was put inside a rubber tyre, doused with petrol and set alight. Demonstrators were photographed in Britain bearing banners saying 'Slay those who insult Islam', 'Butcher those who mock Islam', 'Europe you will pay: Demolition is on its way' and, apparently without irony, 'Behead those who say Islam is a violent religion'.

In the aftermath of all this, the journalist Andrew Mueller interviewed Britain's leading 'moderate' Muslim, Sir Iqbal Sacranie.<sup>15</sup> Moderate he may be by today's Islamic standards, but in Andrew Mueller's account he still stands by the remark he made when Salman Rushdie was condemned to death for writing a novel: 'Death is perhaps too easy for him' - a remark that sets him in ignominious contrast to his courageous predecessor as Britain's most influential Muslim, the late Dr Zaki Badawi, who offered Salman Rushdie sanctuary in his own home. Sacranie told Mueller how



concerned he was about the Danish cartoons. Mueller was concerned too, but for a different reason: 'I am concerned that the ridiculous, disproportionate reaction to some unfunny sketches in an obscure Scandinavian newspaper may confirm that... Islam and the west are fundamentally irreconcilable.' Sacranie, on the other hand, praised British newspapers for not reprinting the cartoons, to which Mueller voiced the suspicion of most of the nation that 'the restraint of British newspapers derived less from sensitivity to Muslim discontent than it did from a desire not to have their windows broken'.

Sacranie explained that 'The person of the Prophet, peace be upon him, is revered so profoundly in the Muslim world, with a love and affection that cannot be explained in words. It goes beyond your parents, your loved ones, your children. That is part of the faith. There is also an Islamic teaching that one does not depict the Prophet.' This rather assumes, as Mueller observed,

that the values of Islam trump anyone else's - which is what any follower of Islam does assume, just as any follower of any religion believes that theirs is the sole way, truth and light. If people wish to love a 7th century preacher more than their own families, that's up to them, but nobody else is obliged to take it seriously . . .

Except that if you don't take it seriously and accord it proper respect you are physically threatened, on a scale that no other religion has aspired to since the Middle Ages. One can't help wondering why such violence is necessary, given that, as Mueller notes: 'If any of you clowns are right about anything, the cartoonists are going to hell anyway - won't that do? In the meantime, if you want to get excited about affronts to Muslims, read the Amnesty International reports on Syria and Saudi Arabia.'

Many people have noted the contrast between the hysterical 'hurt' professed by Muslims and the readiness with which Arab media publish stereotypical anti-Jewish cartoons. At a demonstration in Pakistan against the Danish cartoons, a woman in a black burka was photographed carrying a banner reading 'God Bless Hitler'.

In response to all this frenzied pandemonium, decent liberal

newspapers deplored the violence and made token noises about free speech. But at the same time they expressed 'respect' and 'sympathy' for the deep 'offence' and 'hurt' that Muslims had 'suffered'. The 'hurt' and 'suffering' consisted, remember, not in any person enduring violence or real pain of any kind: nothing more than a few daubs of printing ink in a newspaper that nobody outside Denmark would ever have heard of but for a deliberate campaign of incitement to mayhem.

I am not in favour of offending or hurting anyone just for the sake of it. But I am intrigued and mystified by the disproportionate privileging of religion in our otherwise secular societies. All politicians must get used to disrespectful cartoons of their faces, and nobody riots in their defence. What is so special about religion that we grant it such uniquely privileged respect? As H. L. Mencken said: 'We must respect the other fellow's religion, but only in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart.'

It is in the light of the unparalleled presumption of respect for religion that I make my own disclaimer for this book. I shall not go out of my way to offend, but nor shall I don kid gloves to handle religion any more gently than I would handle anything else.