

CHAPTER 7

The 'Good' Book
and the changing
moral *Zeitgeist*

*Politics has slain its thousands, but religion has slain
its tens of thousands.*

SEAN O'CASEY

There are two ways in which scripture might be a source of morals or rules for living. One is by direct instruction, for example through the Ten Commandments, which are the subject of such bitter contention in the culture wars of America's boondocks. The other is by example: God, or some other biblical character, might serve as - to use the contemporary jargon - a role model. Both scriptural routes, if followed through religiously (the adverb is used in its metaphoric sense but with an eye to its origin), encourage a system of morals which any civilized modern person, whether religious or not, would find - I can put it no more gently - obnoxious.

To be fair, much of the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries.⁹⁰ This may explain some of the sheer strangeness of the Bible. But unfortunately it is this same weird volume that religious zealots hold up to us as the inerrant source of our morals and rules for living. Those who wish to base their morality literally on the Bible have either not read it or not understood it, as Bishop John Shelby Spong, in *The Sins of Scripture*, rightly observed. Bishop Spong, by the way, is a nice example of a liberal bishop whose beliefs are so advanced as to be almost unrecognizable to the majority of those who call themselves Christians. A British counterpart is Richard Holloway, recently retired as Bishop of Edinburgh. Bishop Holloway even describes himself as a 'recovering Christian'. I had a public discussion with him in Edinburgh, which was one of the most stimulating and interesting encounters I have had.⁹¹

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Begin in Genesis with the well-loved story of Noah, derived from the Babylonian myth of Uta-Napisthim and known from the older mythologies of several cultures. The legend of the animals going into the ark two by two is charming, but the moral of the story of

Noah is appalling. God took a dim view of humans, so he (with the exception of one family) drowned the lot of them including children and also, for good measure, the rest of the (presumably blameless) animals as well.

Of course, irritated theologians will protest that we don't take the book of Genesis literally any more. But that is my whole point! We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols or allegories. Such picking and choosing is a matter of personal decision, just as much, or as little, as the atheist's decision to follow this moral precept or that was a personal decision, without an absolute foundation. If one of these is 'morality flying by the seat of its pants', so is the other.

In any case, despite the good intentions of the sophisticated theologian, a frighteningly large number of people still do take their scriptures, including the story of Noah, literally. According to Gallup, they include approximately 50 per cent of the US electorate. Also, no doubt, many of those Asian holy men who blamed the 2004 tsunami not on a plate tectonic shift but on human sins,⁹² ranging from drinking and dancing in bars to breaking some footling sabbath rule. Steeped in the story of Noah, and ignorant of all except biblical learning, who can blame them? Their whole education has led them to view natural disasters as bound up with human affairs, paybacks for human misdemeanours rather than anything so impersonal as plate tectonics. By the way, what presumptuous egocentricity to believe that earth-shaking events, on the scale at which a god (or a tectonic plate) might operate, must always have a human connection. Why should a divine being, with creation and eternity on his mind, care a fig for petty human malefactions? We humans give ourselves such airs, even aggrandizing our poky little 'sins' to the level of cosmic significance!

When I interviewed for television the Reverend Michael Bray, a prominent American anti-abortion activist, I asked him why evangelical Christians were so obsessed with private sexual inclinations such as homosexuality, which didn't interfere with anybody else's life. His reply invoked something like self-defence. Innocent citizens are at risk of becoming collateral damage when God chooses to strike a town with a natural disaster because it houses sinners. In 2005, the fine city of New Orleans was catastrophically

flooded in the aftermath of a hurricane, Katrina. The Reverend Pat Robertson, one of America's best-known televangelists and a former presidential candidate, was reported as blaming the hurricane on a lesbian comedian who happened to live in New Orleans.* You'd think an omnipotent God would adopt a slightly more targeted approach to zapping sinners: a judicious heart attack, perhaps, rather than the wholesale destruction of an entire city just because it happened to be the domicile of one lesbian comedian.

In November 2005, the citizens of Dover, Pennsylvania voted off their local school board the entire slate of fundamentalists who had brought the town notoriety, not to say ridicule, by attempting to enforce the teaching of 'intelligent design'. When Pat Robertson heard that the fundamentalists had been democratically defeated at the ballot, he offered a stern warning to Dover:

I'd like to say to the good citizens of Dover, if there is a disaster in your area, don't turn to God. You just rejected him from your city, and don't wonder why he hasn't helped you when problems begin, if they begin, and I'm not saying they will. But if they do, just remember you just voted God out of your city. And if that's the case, then don't ask for his help, because he might not be there.⁹³

Pat Robertson would be harmless comedy, were he less typical of those who today hold power and influence in the United States.

In the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Noah equivalent, chosen to be spared with his family because he was uniquely righteous, was Abraham's nephew Lot. Two male angels were sent to Sodom to warn Lot to leave the city before the brimstone arrived. Lot hospitably welcomed the angels into his house, whereupon all the men of Sodom gathered around and demanded that Lot should hand the angels over so that they could (what else?)

* It is unclear whether the story, which originated at <http://datelinehollywood.com/archives/2005/09/05/robertson-blames-hurricane-on-choice-of-ellen-deneres-to-host-emmys/> is true. Whether true or not, it is widely believed, no doubt because it is entirely typical of utterances by evangelical clergy, including Robertson, on disasters such as Katrina. See, for example, www.emediawire.com/releases/2005/9/emw281940.htm. The website that says the Katrina story is untrue (www.snopes.com/katrina/satire/robertson.asp) also quotes Robertson as saying, of an earlier Gay Pride march in Orlando, Florida, 'I would warn Orlando that you're right in the way of some serious hurricanes, and I don't think I'd be waving those flags in God's face if I were you.'

sodomize them: 'Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them' (Genesis 19: 5). Yes, 'know' has the Authorized Version's usual euphemistic meaning, which is very funny in the context. Lot's gallantry in refusing the demand suggests that God might have been onto something when he singled him out as the only good man in Sodom. But Lot's halo is tarnished by the terms of his refusal: 'I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly. Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes: only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof (Genesis 19: 7-8).

Whatever else this strange story might mean, it surely tells us something about the respect accorded to women in this intensely religious culture. As it happened, Lot's bargaining away of his daughters' virginity proved unnecessary, for the angels succeeded in repelling the marauders by miraculously striking them blind. They then warned Lot to decamp immediately with his family and his animals, because the city was about to be destroyed. The whole household escaped, with the exception of Lot's unfortunate wife, whom the Lord turned into a pillar of salt because she committed the offence - comparatively mild, one might have thought - of looking over her shoulder at the fireworks display.

Lot's two daughters make a brief reappearance in the story. After their mother was turned into a pillar of salt, they lived with their father in a cave up a mountain. Starved of male company, they decided to make their father drunk and copulate with him. Lot was beyond noticing when his elder daughter arrived in his bed or when she left, but he was not too drunk to impregnate her. The next night the two daughters agreed it was the younger one's turn. Again Lot was too drunk to notice, and he impregnated her too (Genesis 19: 31-6). If this dysfunctional family was the best Sodom had to offer by way of morals, some might begin to feel a certain sympathy with God and his judicial brimstone.

The story of Lot and the Sodomites is eerily echoed in chapter 19 of the book of Judges, where an unnamed Levite (priest) was travelling with his concubine in Gibeah. They spent the night in the house of a hospitable old man. While they were eating their supper,

the men of the city came and beat on the door, demanding that the old man should hand over his male guest 'so that we may know him'. In almost exactly the same words as Lot, the old man said: 'Nay, my brethren, nay, I pray you, do not so wickedly; seeing that this man is come into mine house do not this folly. Behold, here is my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you; but unto this man do not so vile a thing' (Judges 19: 23-4). Again, the misogynistic ethos comes through, loud and clear. I find the phrase 'humble ye them' particularly chilling. Enjoy yourselves by humiliating and raping my daughter and this priest's concubine, but show a proper respect for my guest who is, after all, male. In spite of the similarity between the two stories, the *denouement* was less happy for the Levite's concubine than for Lot's daughters.

The Levite handed her over to the mob, who gang-raped her all night: 'They knew her and abused her all the night until the morning: and when the day began to spring, they let her go. Then came the woman in the dawning of the day, and fell down at the door of the man's house where her lord was, till it was light' (Judges 19: 25-6). In the morning, the Levite found his concubine lying prostrate on the doorstep and said - with what we today might see as callous abruptness - 'Up, and let us be going.' But she didn't move. She was dead. So he 'took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, together with her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the coasts of Israel'. Yes, you read correctly. Look it up in Judges 19: 29. Let's charitably put it down again to the ubiquitous weirdness of the Bible. This story is so similar to that of Lot, one can't help wondering whether a fragment of manuscript became accidentally misplaced in some long-forgotten scriptorium: an illustration of the erratic provenance of sacred texts.

Lot's uncle Abraham was the founding father of all three 'great' monotheistic religions. His patriarchal status renders him only somewhat less likely than God to be taken as a role model. But what modern moralist would wish to follow him? Relatively early in his long life, Abraham went to Egypt to tough out a famine with his wife Sarah. He realized that such a beautiful woman would be desirable to the Egyptians and that therefore his own life, as her husband, might be endangered. So he decided to pass her off as his

sister. In this capacity she was taken into Pharaoh's harem, and Abraham consequently became rich in Pharaoh's favour. God disapproved of this cosy arrangement, and sent plagues on Pharaoh and his house (why not on Abraham?). An understandably aggrieved Pharaoh demanded to know why Abraham had not told him Sarah was his wife. He then handed her back to Abraham and kicked them both out of Egypt (Genesis 12: 18-19). Weirdly, it seems that the couple later tried to pull the same stunt again, this time with Abimelech the King of Gerar. He too was induced by Abraham to marry Sarah, again having been led to believe she was Abraham's sister, not his wife (Genesis 20: 2-5). He too expressed his indignation, in almost identical terms to Pharaoh's, and one can't help sympathizing with both of them. Is the similarity another indicator of textual unreliability?

Such unpleasant episodes in Abraham's story are mere peccadilloes compared with the infamous tale of the sacrificing of his son Isaac (Muslim scripture tells the same story about Abraham's other son, Ishmael). God ordered Abraham to make a burnt offering of his longed-for son. Abraham built an altar, put firewood upon it, and trussed Isaac up on top of the wood. His murdering knife was already in his hand when an angel dramatically intervened with the news of a last-minute change of plan: God was only joking after all, 'tempting' Abraham, and testing his faith. A modern moralist cannot help but wonder how a child could ever recover from such psychological trauma. By the standards of modern morality, this disgraceful story is an example simultaneously of child abuse, bullying in two asymmetrical power relationships, and the first recorded use of the Nuremberg defence: 'I was only obeying orders.' Yet the legend is one of the great foundational myths of all three monotheistic religions.

Once again, modern theologians will protest that the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac should not be taken as literal fact. And, once again, the appropriate response is twofold. First, many many people, even to this day, do take the whole of their scripture to be literal fact, and they have a great deal of political power over the rest of us, especially in the United States and in the Islamic world. Second, if not as literal fact, how should we take the story? As an allegory? Then an allegory for what? Surely nothing praiseworthy.

As a moral lesson? But what kind of morals could one derive from this appalling story? Remember, all I am trying to establish for the moment is that we do not, as a matter of fact, derive our morals from scripture. Or, if we do, we pick and choose among the scriptures for the nice bits and reject the nasty. But then we must have some independent criterion for deciding which are the moral bits: a criterion which, wherever it comes from, cannot come from scripture itself and is presumably available to all of us whether we are religious or not.

Apologists even seek to salvage some decency for the God character in this deplorable tale. Wasn't it good of God to spare Isaac's life at the last minute? In the unlikely event that any of my readers are persuaded by this obscene piece of special pleading, I refer them to another story of human sacrifice, which ended more unhappily. In Judges, chapter 11, the military leader Jephthah made a bargain with God that, if God would guarantee Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites, Jephthah would, without fail, sacrifice as a burnt offering 'whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return'. Jephthah did indeed defeat the Ammonites ('with a very great slaughter', as is par for the course in the book of Judges) and he returned home victorious. Not surprisingly, his daughter, his only child, came out of the house to greet him (with timbrels and dances) and - alas - she was the first living thing to do so. Understandably Jephthah rent his clothes, but there was nothing he could do about it. God was obviously looking forward to the promised burnt offering, and in the circumstances the daughter very decently agreed to be sacrificed. She asked only that she should be allowed to go into the mountains for two months to bewail her virginity. At the end of this time she meekly returned, and Jephthah cooked her. God did not see fit to intervene on this occasion.

God's monumental rage whenever his chosen people flirted with a rival god resembles nothing so much as sexual jealousy of the worst kind, and again it should strike a modern moralist as far from good role-model material. The temptation to sexual infidelity is readily understandable even to those who do not succumb, and it is a staple of fiction and drama, from Shakespeare to bedroom farce. But the apparently irresistible temptation to whore with foreign gods is something we moderns find harder to empathize

with. To my naive eyes, 'Thou shalt have no other gods but me' would seem an easy enough commandment to keep: a doddle, one might think, compared with 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife'. Or her ass. (Or her ox.) Yet throughout the Old Testament, with the same predictable regularity as in bedroom farce, God had only to turn his back for a moment and the Children of Israel would be off and at it with Baal, or some trollop of a graven image.* Or, on one calamitous occasion, a golden calf . . .

Moses, even more than Abraham, is a likely role model for followers of all three monotheistic religions. Abraham may be the original patriarch, but if anybody should be called the doctrinal founder of Judaism and its derivative religions, it is Moses. On the occasion of the golden calf episode, Moses was safely out of the way up Mount Sinai, communing with God and getting tablets of stone graven by him. The people down below (who were on pain of death to refrain from so much as *touching* the mountain) didn't waste any time:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. (Exodus 32: 1)

Aaron got everybody to pool their gold, melted it down and made a golden calf, for which newly invented deity he then built an altar so they could all start sacrificing to it.

Well, they should have known better than to fool around behind God's back like that. He might be up a mountain but he was, after all, omniscient and he lost no time in despatching Moses as his enforcer. Moses raced hotfoot down the mountain, carrying the stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments. When he arrived and saw the golden calf he was so furious that he dropped the tablets and broke them (God later gave him a replacement set, so that was all right). Moses seized the golden calf, burned it, ground it to powder, mixed it with water and made the

* This richly comic idea was suggested to me by Jonathan Miller who, surprisingly, never included it in a *Beyond the Fringe* sketch. I also thank him for recommending the scholarly book upon which it is based: Halbertal and Margalit (1992).

people swallow it. Then he told everybody in the priestly tribe of Levi to pick up a sword and kill as many people as possible. This amounted to about three thousand which, one might have hoped, would have been enough to assuage God's jealous sulk. But no, God wasn't finished yet. In the last verse of this terrible chapter his parting shot was to send a plague upon what was left of the people 'because they made the calf, which Aaron made'.

The book of Numbers tells how God incited Moses to attack the Midianites. His army made short work of slaying all the men, and they burned all the Midianite cities, but they didn't kill the women and children. This merciful restraint by his soldiers infuriated Moses, and he gave orders that all the boy children should be killed, and all the women who were not virgins. 'But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves' (Numbers 31: 18). No, Moses was not a great role model for modern moralists.

In so far as modern religious writers attach any kind of symbolic or allegorical meaning to the massacre of the Midianites, the symbolism is aimed in precisely the wrong direction. The unfortunate Midianites, so far as one can tell from the biblical account, were the victims of genocide in their own country. Yet their name lives on in Christian lore only in that favourite hymn (which I can still sing from memory after fifty years, to two different tunes, both in grim minor keys):

Christian, dost thou see them
On the holy ground?
How the troops of Midian
Prowl and prowl around?
Christian, up and smite them,
Counting gain but loss;
Smite them by the merit
Of the holy cross.

Alas, poor slandered, slaughtered Midianites, to be remembered only as poetic symbols of universal evil in a Victorian hymn.

The rival god Baal seems to have been a perennially seductive tempter to wayward worship. In Numbers, chapter 25, many of the

Israelites were lured by Moabite women to sacrifice to Baal. God reacted with characteristic fury. He ordered Moses to 'Take all the heads of the people and hang them up before the Lord against the sun, that the fierce anger of the Lord may be turned away from Israel.' One cannot help, yet again, marvelling at the extraordinarily draconian view taken of the sin of flirting with rival gods. To our modern sense of values and justice it seems a trifling sin compared to, say, offering your daughter for a gang rape. It is yet another example of the disconnect between scriptural and modern (one is tempted to say civilized) morals. Of course, it is easily enough understood in terms of the theory of memes, and the qualities that a deity needs in order to survive in the meme pool.

The tragi-farce of God's maniacal jealousy against alternative gods recurs continually throughout the Old Testament. It motivates the first of the Ten Commandments (the ones on the tablets that Moses broke: Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5), and it is even more prominent in the (otherwise rather different) substitute commandments that God provided to replace the broken tablets (Exodus 34). Having promised to drive out of their homelands the unfortunate Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, God gets down to what really matters: rival *gods!*

... ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves. For thou shalt worship no other god: for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. Lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go a whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and one call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice; And thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a whoring after their gods, and make thy sons go a whoring after their gods. Thou shalt make thee no molten gods (Exodus 34: 13-17)

I know, yes, of course, of course, times have changed, and no religious leader today (apart from the likes of the Taliban or the American Christian equivalent) thinks like Moses. But that is my whole point. All I am establishing is that modern morality, wherever else it comes from, does not come from the Bible. Apologists

cannot get away with claiming that religion provides them with some sort of inside track to defining what is good and what is bad - a privileged source unavailable to atheists. They cannot get away with it, not even if they employ that favourite trick of interpreting selected scriptures as 'symbolic' rather than literal. By what criterion do you *decide* which passages are symbolic, which literal?

The ethnic cleansing begun in the time of Moses is brought to bloody fruition in the book of Joshua, a text remarkable for the bloodthirsty massacres it records and the xenophobic relish with which it does so. As the charming old song exultantly has it, 'Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and the walls came a-tumbling down . . . There's none like good old Joshuay, at the battle of Jericho.' Good old Joshua didn't rest until 'they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword' (Joshua 6: 21).

Yet again, theologians will protest, it didn't happen. Well, no - the story has it that the walls came tumbling down at the mere sound of men shouting and blowing horns, so indeed it didn't happen - but that is not the point. The point is that, whether true or not, the Bible is held up to us as the source of our morality. And the Bible story of Joshua's destruction of Jericho, and the invasion of the Promised Land in general, is morally indistinguishable from Hitler's invasion of Poland, or Saddam Hussein's massacres of the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs. The Bible may be an arresting and poetic work of fiction, but it is not the sort of book you should give your children to form their morals. As it happens, the story of Joshua in Jericho is the subject of an interesting experiment in child morality, to be discussed later in this chapter.

Do not think, by the way, that the God character in the story nursed any doubts or scruples about the massacres and genocides that accompanied the seizing of the Promised Land. On the contrary, his orders, for example in Deuteronomy 20, were ruthlessly explicit. He made a clear distinction between the people who lived in the land that was needed, and those who lived a long way away. The latter should be invited to surrender peacefully. If they refused, all the men were to be killed and the women carried off for breeding. In contrast to this relatively humane treatment, see what was in store for those tribes unfortunate enough to be already in

residence in the promised *Lebensraum*: 'But of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: But thou shalt utterly destroy them; namely, the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee.'

Do those people who hold up the Bible as an inspiration to moral rectitude have the slightest notion of what is actually written in it? The following offences merit the death penalty, according to Leviticus 20: cursing your parents; committing adultery; making love to your stepmother or your daughter-in-law; homosexuality; marrying a woman and her daughter; bestiality (and, to add injury to insult, the unfortunate beast is to be killed too). You also get executed, of course, for working on the sabbath: the point is made again and again throughout the Old Testament. In Numbers 15, the children of Israel found a man in the wilderness gathering sticks on the forbidden day. They arrested him and then asked God what to do with him. As it turned out, God was in no mood for half-measures that day. 'And the Lord said unto Moses, The man shall surely be put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp. And all the congregation brought him without the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died.' Did this harmless gatherer of firewood have a wife and children to grieve for him? Did he whimper with fear as the first stones flew, and scream with pain as the fusillade crashed into his head? What shocks me today about such stories is not that they really happened. They probably didn't. What makes my jaw drop is that people today should base their lives on such an appalling role model as Yahweh - and, even worse, that they should bossily try to force the same evil monster (whether fact or fiction) on the rest of us.

The political power of America's Ten Commandment tablet-toters is especially regrettable in that great republic whose constitution, after all, was drawn up by men of the Enlightenment in explicitly secular terms. If we took the Ten Commandments seriously, we would rank the worship of the wrong gods, and the making of graven images, as first and second among sins. Rather than condemn the unspeakable vandalism of the Taliban, who

dynamited the 150-foot-high Bamiyan Buddhas in the mountains of Afghanistan, we would praise them for their righteous piety. What we think of as their vandalism was certainly motivated by sincere religious zeal. This is vividly attested by a truly bizarre story, which was the lead in the (London) *Independent* of 6 August 2005. Under the front-page headline, 'The destruction of Mecca', the *Independent* reported:

Historic Mecca, the cradle of Islam, is being buried in an unprecedented onslaught by religious zealots. Almost all of the rich and multi-layered history of the holy city is gone . . . Now the actual birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad is facing the bulldozers, with the connivance of Saudi religious authorities whose hardline interpretation of Islam is compelling them to wipe out their own heritage . . . The motive behind the destruction is the Wahhabists' fanatical fear that places of historical and religious interest could give rise to idolatry or polytheism, the worship of multiple and potentially equal gods. The practice of idolatry in Saudi Arabia remains, in principle, punishable by beheading.

I do not believe there is an atheist in the world who would bulldoze Mecca - or Chartres, York Minster or Notre Dame, the Shwe Dagon, the temples of Kyoto or, of course, the Buddhas of Bamiyan. As the Nobel Prize-winning American physicist Steven Weinberg said, 'Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it, you'd have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, it takes religion.' Blaise Pascal (he of the wager) said something similar: 'Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.'

My main purpose here has not been to show that we *shouldn't* get our morals from scripture (although that is my opinion). My purpose has been to demonstrate that we (and that includes most religious people) as a matter of fact *don't* get our morals from scripture. If we did, we would strictly observe the sabbath and think it just and proper to execute anybody who chose not to. We

would stone to death any new bride who couldn't prove she was a virgin, if her husband pronounced himself unsatisfied with her. We would execute disobedient children. We would . . . but wait. Perhaps I have been unfair. Nice Christians will have been protesting throughout this section: everyone knows the Old Testament is pretty unpleasant. The New Testament of Jesus undoes the damage and makes it all right. Doesn't it?

Is THE NEW TESTAMENT ANY BETTER?

Well, there's no denying that, from a moral point of view, Jesus is a huge improvement over the cruel ogre of the Old Testament. Indeed Jesus, if he existed (or whoever wrote his script if he didn't) was surely one of the great ethical innovators of history. The Sermon on the Mount is way ahead of its time. His 'turn the other cheek' anticipated Gandhi and Martin Luther King by two thousand years. It was not for nothing that I wrote an article called 'Atheists for Jesus' (and was later delighted to be presented with a T-shirt bearing the legend).⁹⁴

But the moral superiority of Jesus precisely bears out my point. Jesus was not content to derive his ethics from the scriptures of his upbringing. He explicitly departed from them, for example when he deflated the dire warnings about breaking the sabbath. 'The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath' has been generalized into a wise proverb. Since a principal thesis of this chapter is that we do not, and should not, derive our morals from scripture, Jesus has to be honoured as a model for that very thesis.

Jesus' family values, it has to be admitted, were not such as one might wish to focus on. He was short, to the point of brusqueness, with his own mother, and he encouraged his disciples to abandon their families to follow him. 'If any man come to me and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.' The American comedian Julia Sweeney expressed her bewilderment in her one-woman stage show, *Letting Go of God*.⁹⁵ 'Isn't that what cults do? Get you to reject your family in order to inculcate you?'⁹⁶

Notwithstanding his somewhat dodgy family values, Jesus' ethical teachings were - at least by comparison with the ethical disaster area that is the Old Testament - admirable; but there are other teachings in the New Testament that no good person should support. I refer especially to the central doctrine of Christianity: that of 'atonement' for 'original sin'. This teaching, which lies at the heart of New Testament theology, is almost as morally obnoxious as the story of Abraham setting out to barbecue Isaac, which it resembles - and that is no accident, as Geza Vermes makes clear in *The Changing Faces of Jesus*. Original sin itself comes straight from the Old Testament myth of Adam and Eve. Their sin - eating the fruit of a forbidden tree - seems mild enough to merit a mere reprimand. But the symbolic nature of the fruit (knowledge of good and evil, which in practice turned out to be knowledge that they were naked) was enough to turn their scrumping escapade into the mother and father of all sins.* They and all their descendants were banished forever from the Garden of Eden, deprived of the gift of eternal life, and condemned to generations of painful labour, in the field and in childbirth respectively.

So far, so vindictive: par for the Old Testament course. New Testament theology adds a new injustice, topped off by a new sado-masochism whose viciousness even the Old Testament barely exceeds. It is, when you think about it, remarkable that a religion should adopt an instrument of torture and execution as its sacred symbol, often worn around the neck. Lenny Bruce rightly quipped that 'If Jesus had been killed twenty years ago, Catholic school children would be wearing little electric chairs around their necks instead of crosses.' But the theology and punishment-theory behind it is even worse. The sin of Adam and Eve is thought to have passed down the male line - transmitted in the semen according to Augustine. What kind of ethical philosophy is it that condemns every child, even before it is born, to inherit the sin of a remote ancestor? Augustine, by the way, who rightly regarded himself as something of a personal authority on sin, was responsible for

* I am aware that 'scrumping' will not be familiar to American readers. But I enjoy reading unfamiliar American words and looking them up to broaden my vocabulary. I have deliberately used a few other region-specific words for this reason. Scrumping itself is a *mot juste* of unusual economy. It doesn't just mean stealing: it specifically means stealing *apples* and *only* apples. It is hard for a *mot* to get more *juste* than that. Admittedly the Genesis story doesn't specify that the fruit was an apple, but tradition has long held it so.

coining the phrase 'original sin'. Before him it was known as 'ancestral sin'. Augustine's pronouncements and debates epitomize, for me, the unhealthy preoccupation of early Christian theologians with sin. They could have devoted their pages and their sermons to extolling the sky splashed with stars, or mountains and green forests, seas and dawn choruses. These are occasionally mentioned, but the Christian focus is overwhelmingly on sin sin sin sin sin sin sin. What a nasty little preoccupation to have dominating your life. Sam Harris is magnificently scathing in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*: 'Your principal concern appears to be that the Creator of the universe will take offense at something people do while naked. This prudery of yours contributes daily to the surplus of human misery.'

But now, the sado-masochism. God incarnated himself as a man, Jesus, in order that he should be tortured and executed in *atonement* for the hereditary sin of Adam. Ever since Paul expounded this repellent doctrine, Jesus has been worshipped as the *redeemer* of all our sins. Not just the past sin of Adam: *future* sins as well, whether future people decided to commit them or not!

As another aside, it has occurred to various people, including Robert Graves in his epic novel *King Jesus*, that poor Judas Iscariot has received a bad deal from history, given that his 'betrayal' was a necessary part of the cosmic plan. The same could be said of Jesus' alleged murderers. If Jesus wanted to be betrayed and then murdered, in order that he could redeem us all, isn't it rather unfair of those who consider themselves redeemed to take it out on Judas and on Jews down the ages? I have already mentioned the long list of non-canonical gospels. A manuscript purporting to be the lost Gospel of Judas has recently been translated and has received publicity in consequence.⁹⁷ The circumstances of its discovery are disputed, but it seems to have turned up in Egypt some time in the 1970s or 60s. It is in Coptic script on sixty-two pages of papyrus, carbon-dated to around AD 300 but probably based on an earlier Greek manuscript. Whoever the author was, the gospel is seen from the point of view of Judas Iscariot and makes the case that Judas betrayed Jesus only because Jesus asked him to play that role. It was all part of the plan to get Jesus crucified so that he could redeem humankind. Obnoxious as that doctrine is, it seems to com-

pound the unpleasantness that Judas has been vilified ever since.

I have described atonement, the central doctrine of Christianity, as vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent. We should also dismiss it as barking mad, but for its ubiquitous familiarity which has dulled our objectivity. If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them, without having himself tortured and executed in payment - thereby, incidentally, condemning remote future generations of Jews to pogroms and persecution as 'Christ-killers': did that hereditary sin pass down in the semen too?

Paul, as the Jewish scholar Geza Vermes makes clear, was steeped in the old Jewish theological principle that without blood there is no atonement.⁹⁸ Indeed, in his Epistle to the Hebrews (9: 22) he said as much. Progressive ethicists today find it hard to defend any kind of retributive theory of punishment, let alone the scapegoat theory - executing an innocent to pay for the sins of the guilty. In any case (one can't help wondering), who was God trying to impress? Presumably himself - judge and jury as well as execution victim. To cap it all, Adam, the supposed perpetrator of the original sin, never existed in the first place: an awkward fact - excusably unknown to Paul but presumably known to an omniscient God (and Jesus, if you believe he was God?) - which fundamentally undermines the premise of the whole tortuously nasty theory. Oh, but of course, the story of Adam and Eve was only ever *symbolic*, wasn't it? *Symbolic*? So, in order to impress himself, Jesus had himself tortured and executed, in vicarious punishment for a *symbolic* sin committed by a *non-existent* individual? As I said, barking mad, as well as viciously unpleasant.

Before leaving the Bible, I need to call attention to one particularly unpalatable aspect of its ethical teaching. Christians seldom realize that much of the moral consideration for others which is apparently promoted by both the Old and New Testaments was originally intended to apply only to a narrowly defined in-group. 'Love thy neighbour' didn't mean what we now think it means. It meant only 'Love another Jew.' The point is devastatingly made by the American physician and evolutionary anthropologist John Hartung. He has written a remarkable paper on the evolution and biblical history of in-group morality, laying stress, too, on the flip side - out-group hostility.

LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

John Hartung's black humour is evident from the outset," where he tells of a Southern Baptist initiative to count the number of Alabamans in hell. As reported in the *New York Times* and *Newsday* the final total, 1.86 million, was estimated using a secret weighting formula whereby Methodists are more likely to be saved than Roman Catholics, while 'virtually everyone not belonging to a church congregation was counted among the lost'. The preternatural smugness of such people is reflected today in the various 'rapture' websites, where the author always takes it completely for granted that he will be among those who 'disappear' into heaven when the 'end times' come. Here is a typical example, from the author of 'Rapture Ready', one of the more odiously sanctimonious specimens of the genre: 'If the rapture should take place, resulting in my absence, it will become necessary for tribulation saints to mirror or financially support this site.'*

Hartung's interpretation of the Bible suggests that it offers no grounds for such smug complacency among Christians. Jesus limited his in-group of the saved strictly to Jews, in which respect he was following the Old Testament tradition, which was all he knew. Hartung clearly shows that 'Thou shalt not kill' was never intended to mean what we now think it means. It meant, very specifically, thou shalt not kill Jews. And all those commandments that make reference to 'thy neighbour' are equally exclusive. 'Neighbour' means fellow Jew. Moses Maimonides, the highly respected twelfth-century rabbi and physician, expounds the full meaning of 'Thou shalt not kill' as follows: 'If one slays a single Israelite, he transgresses a negative commandment, for Scripture says, Thou shalt not murder. If one murders wilfully in the presence of witnesses, he is put to death by the sword. Needless to say, one is not put to death if he kills a heathen.' Needless to say!

Hartung quotes the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Supreme Court, headed by the high priest) in similar vein, as exonerating a man who hypothetically killed an Israelite by mistake, while intending to kill an animal or a heathen. This teasing little moral conundrum raises a nice point. What if he were to throw a stone into a group

* You may not know the meaning of 'tribulation saints' in this sentence. Don't bother: you have better things to do.

of nine heathens and one Israelite and have the misfortune to kill the Israelite? Hm, difficult! But the answer is ready. 'Then his non-liability can be inferred from the fact that the majority were heathens.'

Hartung uses many of the same biblical quotations as I have used in this chapter, about the conquest of the Promised Land by Moses, Joshua and the Judges. I was careful to concede that religious people don't think in a biblical way any more. For me, this demonstrated that our morals, whether we are religious or not, come from another source; and that other source, whatever it is, is available to all of us, regardless of religion or lack of it. But Hartung tells of a horrifying study by the Israeli psychologist George Tamarin. Tamarin presented to more than a thousand Israeli schoolchildren, aged between eight and fourteen, the account of the battle of Jericho in the book of Joshua:

Joshua said to the people, 'Shout; for the LORD has given you the city. And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction . . . But all silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are sacred to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD.' . . . Then they utterly destroyed all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and asses, with the edge of the sword . . . And they burned the city with fire, and all within it; only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and of iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD.

Tamarin then asked the children a simple moral question: 'Do you think Joshua and the Israelites acted rightly or not?' They had to choose between A (total approval), B (partial approval) and C (total disapproval). The results were polarized: 66 per cent gave total approval and 26 per cent total disapproval, with rather fewer (8 per cent) in the middle with partial approval. Here are three typical answers from the total approval (A) group:

In my opinion Joshua and the Sons of Israel acted well, and here are the reasons: God promised them this land,

and gave them permission to conquer. If they would not have acted in this manner or killed anyone, then there would be the danger that the Sons of Israel would have assimilated among the Goyim.

In my opinion Joshua was right when he did it, one reason being that God commanded him to exterminate the people so that the tribes of Israel will not be able to assimilate amongst them and learn their bad ways.

Joshua did good because the people who inhabited the land were of a different religion, and when Joshua killed them he wiped their religion from the earth.

The justification for the genocidal massacre by Joshua is religious in every case. Even those in category C, who gave total disapproval, did so, in some cases, for backhanded religious reasons. One girl, for example, disapproved of Joshua's conquering Jericho because, in order to do so, he had to enter it:

I think it is bad, since the Arabs are impure and if one enters an impure land one will also become impure and share their curse.

Two others who totally disapproved did so because Joshua destroyed everything, including animals and property, instead of keeping some as spoil for the Israelites:

I think Joshua did not act well, as they could have spared the animals for themselves.

I think Joshua did not act well, as he could have left the property of Jericho; if he had not destroyed the property it would have belonged to the Israelites.

Once again the sage Maimonides, often cited for his scholarly wisdom, is in no doubt where he stands on this issue: 'It is a positive commandment to destroy the seven nations, as it is said: *Thou shalt utterly destroy them*. If one does not put to death any of them that

falls into one's power, one transgresses a negative commandment, as it is said: *Thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth.*'

Unlike Maimonides, the children in Tamarin's experiment were young enough to be innocent. Presumably the savage views they expressed were those of their parents, or the cultural group in which they were brought up. It is, I suppose, not unlikely that Palestinian children, brought up in the same war-torn country, would offer equivalent opinions in the opposite direction. These considerations fill me with despair. They seem to show the immense power of religion, and especially the religious upbringing of children, to divide people and foster historic enmities and hereditary vendettas. I cannot help remarking that two out of Tamarin's three representative quotations from group A mentioned the evils of assimilation, while the third one stressed the importance of killing people in order to stamp out their religion.

Tamarin ran a fascinating control group in his experiment. A different group of 168 Israeli children were given the same text from the book of Joshua, but with Joshua's own name replaced by 'General Lin' and 'Israel' replaced by 'a Chinese kingdom 3,000 years ago'. Now the experiment gave opposite results. Only 7 per cent approved of General Lin's behaviour, and 75 per cent disapproved. In other words, when their loyalty to Judaism was removed from the calculation, the majority of the children agreed with the moral judgements that most modern humans would share. Joshua's action was a deed of barbaric genocide. But it all looks different from a religious point of view. And the difference starts early in life. It was religion that made the difference between children condemning genocide and condoning it.

In the latter half of Hartung's paper, he moves on to the New Testament. To give a brief summary of his thesis, Jesus was a devotee of the same in-group morality - coupled with out-group hostility - that was taken for granted in the Old Testament. Jesus was a loyal Jew. It was Paul who invented the idea of taking the Jewish God to the Gentiles. Hartung puts it more bluntly than I dare: 'Jesus would have turned over in his grave if he had known that Paul would be taking his plan to the pigs.'

Hartung has some good fun with the book of Revelation, which is certainly one of the weirdest books in the Bible. It is supposed to

have been written by St John and, as *Ken's Guide to the Bible* neatly put it, if his epistles can be seen as John on pot, then Revelation is John on acid.¹⁰⁰ Hartung draws attention to the two verses in Revelation where the number of those 'sealed' (which some sects, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, interpret to mean 'saved') is limited to 144,000. Hartung's point is that they all had to be Jews: 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes. Ken Smith goes further, pointing out that the 144,000 elect 'did not defile themselves with women', which presumably means that none of them could *be* women. Well, that's the sort of thing we've come to expect.

There's a lot more in Hartung's entertaining paper. I shall simply recommend it once more, and summarize it in a quotation:

The Bible is a blueprint of in-group morality, complete with instructions for genocide, enslavement of out-groups, and world domination. But the Bible is not evil by virtue of its objectives or even its glorification of murder, cruelty, and rape. Many ancient works do that - The Iliad, the Icelandic Sagas, the tales of the ancient Syrians and the inscriptions of the ancient Mayans, for example. But no one is selling the Iliad as a foundation for morality. Therein lies the problem. The Bible is sold, and bought, as a guide to how people should live their lives. And it is, by far, the world's all-time best seller.

Lest it be thought that the exclusiveness of traditional Judaism is unique among religions, look at the following confident verse from a hymn by Isaac Watts (1674-1748):

Lord, I ascribe it to Thy Grace,
And not to chance, as others do,
That I was born of Christian Race
And not a Heathen or a Jew.

What puzzles me about this verse is not the exclusiveness *per se* but the logic. Since plenty of others *were* born into religions other than Christianity, how did God decide which future people should

receive such favoured birth? Why favour Isaac Watts and those individuals whom he visualized singing his hymn? In any case, before Isaac Watts was conceived, what was the nature of the entity being favoured? These are deep waters, but perhaps not too deep for a mind tuned to theology. Isaac Watts's hymn is reminiscent of three daily prayers that male Orthodox and Conservative (but not Reform) Jews are taught to recite: 'Blessed are You for not making me a Gentile. Blessed are You for not making me a woman. Blessed are You for not making me a slave.'

Religion is undoubtedly a divisive force, and this is one of the main accusations levelled against it. But it is frequently and rightly said that wars, and feuds between religious groups or sects, are seldom actually about theological disagreements. When an Ulster Protestant paramilitary murders a Catholic, he is not muttering to himself, 'Take that, transubstantiationist, mariolatrous, incense-reeking bastard!' He is much more likely to be avenging the death of another Protestant killed by another Catholic, perhaps in the course of a sustained transgenerational vendetta. Religion is a *label* of in-group/out-group enmity and vendetta, not necessarily worse than other labels such as skin colour, language or preferred football team, but often available when other labels are not.

Yes yes, of course the troubles in Northern Ireland are political. There really has been economic and political oppression of one group by another, and it goes back centuries. There really are genuine grievances and injustices, and these seem to have little to do with religion; except that - and this is important and widely overlooked - without religion there would be no labels by which to decide whom to oppress and whom to avenge. And the real problem in Northern Ireland is that the labels are inherited down many generations. Catholics, whose parents, grandparents and great-grandparents went to Catholic schools, send their children to Catholic schools. Protestants, whose parents, grandparents and great-grandparents went to Protestant schools, send their children to Protestant schools. The two sets of people have the same skin colour, they speak the same language, they enjoy the same things, but they might as well belong to different species, so deep is the historic divide. And without religion, and religiously segregated education, the divide simply would not be there. From Kosovo to

Palestine, from Iraq to Sudan, from Ulster to the Indian sub-continent, look carefully at any region of the world where you find intractable enmity and violence between rival groups. I cannot guarantee that you'll find religions as the dominant labels for in-groups and out-groups. But it's a very good bet.

In India at the time of partition, more than a million people were massacred in religious riots between Hindus and Muslims (and fifteen million displaced from their homes). There were no badges other than religious ones with which to label whom to kill. Ultimately, there was nothing to divide them but religion. Salman Rushdie was moved by a more recent bout of religious massacres in India to write an article called 'Religion, as ever, is the poison in India's blood'.¹⁰¹ Here's his concluding paragraph:

What is there to respect in any of this, or in any of the crimes now being committed almost daily around the world in religion's dreaded name? How well, with what fatal results, religion erects totems, and how willing we are to kill for them! And when we've done it often enough, the deadening of affect that results makes it easier to do it again.

So India's problem turns out to be the world's problem. What happened in India has happened in God's name.

The problem's name is God.

I do not deny that humanity's powerful tendencies towards in-group loyalties and out-group hostilities would exist even in the absence of religion. Fans of rival football teams are an example of the phenomenon writ small. Even football supporters sometimes divide along religious lines, as in the case of Glasgow Rangers and Glasgow Celtic. Languages (as in Belgium), races and tribes (especially in Africa) can be important divisive tokens. But religion amplifies and exacerbates the damage in at least three ways:

- Labelling of children. Children are described as 'Catholic children' or 'Protestant children' etc. from an early age, and certainly far too early for them to have made up their own

minds on what they think about religion (I return to this abuse of childhood in Chapter 9).

- Segregated schools. Children are educated, again often from a very early age, with members of a religious in-group and separately from children whose families adhere to other religions. It is not an exaggeration to say that the troubles in Northern Ireland would disappear in a generation if segregated schooling were abolished.
- Taboos against 'marrying out'. This perpetuates hereditary feuds and vendettas by preventing the mingling of feuding groups. Intermarriage, if it were permitted, would naturally tend to mollify enmities.

The village of Glenarm in Northern Ireland is the seat of the Earls of Antrim. On one occasion within living memory, the then Earl did the unthinkable: he married a Catholic. Immediately, in houses throughout Glenarm, the blinds were drawn in mourning. A horror of 'marrying out' is also widespread among religious Jews. Several of the Israeli children quoted above mentioned the dire perils of 'assimilation' at the forefront of their defence of Joshua's Battle of Jericho. When people of different religions do marry, it is described with foreboding on both sides as a 'mixed marriage' and there are often prolonged battles over how the children are to be brought up. When I was a child and still carried a guttering torch for the Anglican Church, I remember being dumbfounded to be told of a rule that when a Roman Catholic married an Anglican, the children were always brought up Catholic. I could readily understand why a priest of either denomination would try to insist on this condition. What I couldn't understand (still can't) was the asymmetry. Why didn't the Anglican priests retaliate with the equivalent rule in reverse? Just less ruthless, I suppose. My old chaplain and Betjeman's 'Our Padre' were simply too nice.

Sociologists have done statistical surveys of religious homogamy (marrying somebody of the same religion) and heterogamy (marrying somebody of a different religion). Norval D. Glenn, of the University of Texas at Austin, gathered a number of such studies up to 1978 and analysed them together.¹⁰² He concluded that there is

a significant tendency towards religious homogamy in Christians (Protestants marry Protestants, and Catholics Catholics, and this goes beyond the ordinary 'boy next door effect'), but that it is especially marked among Jews. Out of a total sample of 6,021 married respondents to the questionnaire, 140 called themselves Jews and, of these, 85.7 per cent married Jews. This is hugely greater than the randomly expected percentage of homogamous marriages. And of course it will not come as news to anybody. Observant Jews are strongly discouraged from 'marrying out', and the taboo shows itself in Jewish jokes about mothers warning their boys about blonde shiksas lying in wait to entrap them. Here are typical statements by three American rabbis:

- 'I refuse to officiate at interfaith marriages.'
- 'I officiate when couples state their intention to raise children as Jews.'
- 'I officiate if couples agree to premarital counselling.'

Rabbis who will agree to officiate together with a Christian priest are rare, and much in demand.

Even if religion did no other harm in itself, its wanton and carefully nurtured divisiveness - its deliberate and cultivated pandering to humanity's natural tendency to favour in-groups and shun out-groups - would be enough to make it a significant force for evil in the world.

THE MORAL *ZEITGEIST*

This chapter began by showing that we do not - even the religious among us - ground our morality in holy books, no matter what we may fondly imagine. How, then, do we decide what is right and what is wrong? No matter how we answer that question, there is a consensus about what we do as a matter of fact consider right and wrong: a consensus that prevails surprisingly widely. The consensus has no obvious connection with religion. It extends, however, to

most religious people, whether or not they *think* their morals come from scripture. With notable exceptions such as the Afghan Taliban and the American Christian equivalent, most people pay lip service to the same broad liberal consensus of ethical principles. The majority of us don't cause needless suffering; we believe in free speech and protect it even if we disagree with what is being said; we pay our taxes; we don't cheat, don't kill, don't commit incest, don't do things to others that we would not wish done to us. Some of these good principles can be found in holy books, but buried alongside much else that no decent person would wish to follow: and the holy books do not supply any rules for distinguishing the good principles from the bad.

One way to express our consensual ethics is as a 'New Ten Commandments'. Various individuals and institutions have attempted this. What is significant is that they tend to produce rather similar results to each other, and what they produce is characteristic of the times in which they happen to live. Here is one set of 'New Ten Commandments' from today, which I happened to find on an atheist website.¹⁰³

- Do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you.
- In all things, strive to cause no harm.
- Treat your fellow human beings, your fellow living things, and the world in general with love, honesty, faithfulness and respect.
- Do not overlook evil or shrink from administering justice, but always be ready to forgive wrongdoing freely admitted and honestly regretted.
- Live life with a sense of joy and wonder.
- Always seek to be learning something new.
- Test all things; always check your ideas against the facts, and be ready to discard even a cherished belief if it does not conform to them.

- Never seek to censor or cut yourself off from dissent; always respect the right of others to disagree with you.
- Form independent opinions on the basis of your own reason and experience; do not allow yourself to be led blindly by others.
- Question everything.

This little collection is not the work of a great sage or prophet or professional ethicist. It is just one ordinary web logger's rather endearing attempt to summarize the principles of the good life today, for comparison with the biblical Ten Commandments. It was the first list I found when I typed 'New Ten Commandments' into a search engine, and I deliberately didn't look any further. The whole point is that it is the sort of list that any ordinary, decent person today would come up with. Not everybody would home in on exactly the same list of ten. The philosopher John Rawls might include something like the following: 'Always devise your rules as if you didn't know whether you were going to be at the top or the bottom of the pecking order.' An alleged Inuit system for sharing out food is a practical example of the Rawls principle: the individual who cuts up the food gets last pick.

In my own amended Ten Commandments, I would choose some of the above, but I would also try to find room for, among others:

- Enjoy your own sex life (so long as it damages nobody else) and leave others to enjoy theirs in private whatever their inclinations, which are none of your business.
- Do not discriminate or oppress on the basis of sex, race or (as far as possible) species.
- Do not indoctrinate your children. Teach them how to think for themselves, how to evaluate evidence, and how to disagree with you.
- Value the future on a timescale longer than your own.

But never mind these small differences of priority. The point is

that we have almost all moved on, and in a big way, since biblical times. Slavery, which was taken for granted in the Bible and throughout most of history, was abolished in civilized countries in the nineteenth century. All civilized nations now accept what was widely denied up to the 1920s, that a woman's vote, in an election or on a jury, is the equal of a man's. In today's enlightened societies (a category that manifestly does not include, for example, Saudi Arabia), women are no longer regarded as property, as they clearly were in biblical times. Any modern legal system would have prosecuted Abraham for child abuse. And if he had actually carried through his plan to sacrifice Isaac, we would have convicted him of first-degree murder. Yet, according to the *mores* of his time, his conduct was entirely admirable, obeying God's commandment. Religious or not, we have all changed massively in our attitude to what is right and what is wrong. What is the nature of this change, and what drives it?

In any society there exists a somewhat mysterious consensus, which changes over the decades, and for which it is not pretentious to use the German loan-word *Zeitgeist* (spirit of the times). I said that female suffrage was now universal in the world's democracies, but this reform is in fact astonishingly recent. Here are some dates at which women were granted the vote:

New Zealand	1893
Australia	1902
Finland	1906
Norway	1913
United States	1920
Britain	1928
France	1945
Belgium	1946
Switzerland	1971
Kuwait	2006

This spread of dates through the twentieth century is a gauge of the shifting *Zeitgeist*. Another is our attitude to race. In the early part of the twentieth century, almost everybody in Britain (and many other countries too) would be judged racist by today's

standards. Most white people believed that black people (in which category they would have lumped the very diverse Africans with unrelated groups from India, Australia and Melanesia) were inferior to white people in almost all respects except - patronizingly - sense of rhythm. The 1920s equivalent of James Bond was that cheerfully debonair boyhood hero, Bulldog Drummond. In one novel, *The Black Gang*, Drummond refers to 'Jews, foreigners, and other unwashed folk'. In the climax scene of *The Female of the Species*, Drummond is cleverly disguised as Pedro, black servant of the arch-villain. For his dramatic disclosure, to the reader as well as to the villain, that 'Pedro' is really Drummond himself, he could have said: 'You think I am Pedro. Little do you realize, I am your arch-enemy Drummond, blacked up.' Instead, he chose these words: 'Every beard is not false, but every nigger smells. That beard ain't false, dearie, and dis nigger don't smell. So I'm thinking, there's something wrong somewhere.' I read it in the 1950s, three decades after it was written, and it was (just) still possible for a boy to thrill to the drama and not notice the racism. Nowadays, it would be inconceivable.

Thomas Henry Huxley, by the standards of his times, was an enlightened and liberal progressive. But his times were not ours, and in 1871 he wrote the following:

No rational man, cognizant of the facts, believes that the average negro is the equal, still less the superior, of the white man. And if this be true, it is simply incredible that, when all his disabilities are removed, and our prognathous relative has a fair field and no favor, as well as no oppressor, he will be able to compete successfully with his bigger-brained and smaller-jawed rival, in a contest which is to be carried on by thoughts and not by bites. The highest places in the hierarchy of civilization will assuredly not be within the reach of our dusky cousins.¹⁰⁴

It is a commonplace that good historians don't judge statements from past times by the standards of their own. Abraham Lincoln, like Huxley, was ahead of his time, yet his views on matters of race

also sound backwardly racist in ours. Here he is in a debate in 1858 with Stephen A. Douglas:

I will say, then, that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races; that I am not, nor ever have been, in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say, in addition to this, that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And in as much as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.¹⁰⁵

Had Huxley and Lincoln been born and educated in our time, they would have been the first to cringe with the rest of us at their own Victorian sentiments and unctuous tone. I quote them only to illustrate how the *Zeitgeist* moves on. If even Huxley, one of the great liberal minds of his age, and even Lincoln, who freed the slaves, could say such things, just think what the *average* Victorian must have thought. Going back to the eighteenth century it is, of course, well known that Washington, Jefferson and other men of the Enlightenment held slaves. The *Zeitgeist* moves on, so inexorably that we sometimes take it for granted and forget that the change is a real phenomenon in its own right.

There are numerous other examples. When the sailors first landed in Mauritius and saw the gentle dodos, it never occurred to them to do anything other than club them to death. They didn't even want to eat them (they were described as unpalatable). Presumably, hitting defenceless, tame, flightless birds over the head with a club was just something to do. Nowadays such behaviour would be unthinkable, and the extinction of a modern equivalent of the dodo, even by accident, let alone by deliberate human killing, is regarded as a tragedy.

Just such a tragedy, by the standards of today's cultural climate, was the more recent extinction of *Thylacinus*, the Tasmanian wolf. These now iconically lamented creatures had a bounty on their heads until as recently as 1909. In Victorian novels of Africa, 'elephant', 'lion' and 'antelope' (note the revealing singular) are 'game' and what you do to game, without a second thought, is shoot it. Not for food. Not for self-defence. For 'sport'. But now the *Zeitgeist* has changed. Admittedly, rich, sedentary 'sportsmen' may shoot wild African animals from the safety of a Land-Rover and take the stuffed heads back home. But they have to pay through the nose to do so, and are widely despised for it. Wildlife conservation and the conservation of the environment have become accepted values with the same moral status as was once accorded to keeping the sabbath and shunning graven images.

The swinging sixties are legendary for their liberal modernity. But at the beginning of that decade a prosecuting barrister, in the trial for obscenity of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, could still ask the jury: 'Would you approve of your young sons, young daughters - because girls can read as well as boys [can you *believe* he said that?] - reading this book? Is it a book you would have lying around in your own house? Is it a book you would even wish your wife or your servants to read?' This last rhetorical question is a particularly stunning illustration of the speed with which the *Zeitgeist* changes.

The American invasion of Iraq is widely condemned for its civilian casualties, yet these casualty figures are orders of magnitude lower than comparable numbers for the Second World War. There seems to be a steadily shifting standard of what is morally acceptable. Donald Rumsfeld, who sounds so callous and odious today, would have sounded like a bleeding-heart liberal if he had said the same things during the Second World War. Something has shifted in the intervening decades. It has shifted in all of us, and the shift has no connection with religion. If anything, it happens in spite of religion, not because of it.

The shift is in a recognizably consistent direction, which most of us would judge as improvement. Even Adolf Hitler, widely regarded as pushing the envelope of evil into uncharted territory, would not have stood out in the time of Caligula or of Genghis Khan. Hitler

no doubt killed more people than Genghis, but he had twentieth-century technology at his disposal. And did even Hitler gain his greatest *pleasure*, as Genghis avowedly did, from seeing his victims 'near and dear bathed in tears'? We judge Hitler's degree of evil by the standards of today, and the moral *Zeitgeist* has moved on since Caligula's time, just as the technology has. Hitler seems especially evil only by the more benign standards of our time.

Within my lifetime, large numbers of people thoughtlessly bandied derogatory nicknames and national stereotypes: Frog, Wop, Dago, Hun, Yid, Coon, Nip, Wog. I won't claim that such words have disappeared, but they are now widely deplored in polite circles. The word 'negro', even though not intended to be insulting, can be used to date a piece of English prose. Prejudices are indeed revealing giveaways of the date of a piece of writing. In his own time, a respected Cambridge theologian, A. C. Bouquet, was able to begin the chapter on Islam of his *Comparative Religion* with these words: 'The Semite is not a natural monotheist, as was supposed about the middle of the nineteenth century. He is an animist.' The obsession with race (as opposed to culture) and the revealing use of the singular ('The Semite . . . He is an animist') to reduce an entire plurality of people to one 'type' are not heinous by any standards. But they are another tiny indicator of the changing *Zeitgeist*. No Cambridge professor of theology or any other subject would today use those words. Such subtle hints of changing *mores* tell us that Bouquet was writing no later than the middle of the twentieth century. It was in fact 1941.

Go back another four decades, and the changing standards become unmistakeable. In a previous book I quoted H. G. Wells's Utopian *New Republic*, and I shall do so again because it is such a shocking illustration of the point I am making.

And how will the New Republic treat the inferior races?
How will it deal with the black? . . . the yellow man? . . .
the Jew? . . . those swarms of black, and brown, and dirty-
white, and yellow people, who do not come into the new
needs of efficiency? Well, the world is a world, and not a
charitable institution, and I take it they will have to go . . .
And the ethical system of these men of the New Republic,

the ethical system which will dominate the world state, will be shaped primarily to favour the procreation of what is fine and efficient and beautiful in humanity - beautiful and strong bodies, clear and powerful minds . . . And the method that nature has followed hitherto in the shaping of the world, whereby weakness was prevented from propagating weakness . . . is death . . . The men of the New Republic . . . will have an ideal that will make the killing worth the while.

That was written in 1902, and Wells was regarded as a progressive in his own time. In 1902 such sentiments, while not widely agreed, would have made for an acceptable dinner-party argument. Modern readers, by contrast, literally gasp with horror when they see the words. We are forced to realize that Hitler, appalling though he was, was not quite as far outside the *Zeitgeist* of his time as he seems from our vantage-point today. How swiftly the *Zeitgeist* changes - and it moves in parallel, on a broad front, throughout the educated world.

Where, then, have these concerted and steady changes in social consciousness come from? The onus is not on me to answer. For my purposes it is sufficient that they certainly have not come from religion. If forced to advance a theory, I would approach it along the following lines. We need to explain why the changing moral *Zeitgeist* is so widely synchronized across large numbers of people; and we need to explain its relatively consistent direction.

First, how is it synchronized across so many people? It spreads itself from mind to mind through conversations in bars and at dinner parties, through books and book reviews, through newspapers and broadcasting, and nowadays through the Internet. Changes in the moral climate are signalled in editorials, on radio talk shows, in political speeches, in the patter of stand-up comedians and the scripts of soap operas, in the votes of parliaments making laws and the decisions of judges interpreting them. One way to put it would be in terms of changing meme frequencies in the meme pool, but I shall not pursue that.

Some of us lag behind the advancing wave of the changing moral *Zeitgeist* and some of us are slightly ahead. But most of us in the

twenty-first century are bunched together and way ahead of our counterparts in the Middle Ages, or in the time of Abraham, or even as recently as the 1920s. The whole wave keeps moving, and even the vanguard of an earlier century (T. H. Huxley is the obvious example) would find itself way behind the laggards of a later century. Of course, the advance is not a smooth incline but a meandering sawtooth. There are local and temporary setbacks such as the United States is suffering from its government in the early 2000s. But over the longer timescale, the progressive trend is unmistakable and it will continue.

What impels it in its consistent direction? We mustn't neglect the driving role of individual leaders who, ahead of their time, stand up and persuade the rest of us to move on with them. In America, the ideals of racial equality were fostered by political leaders of the calibre of Martin Luther King, and entertainers, sportsmen and other public figures and role models such as Paul Robeson, Sidney Poitier, Jesse Owens and Jackie Robinson. The emancipations of slaves and of women owed much to charismatic leaders. Some of these leaders were religious; some were not. Some who were religious did their good deeds because they were religious. In other cases their religion was incidental. Although Martin Luther King was a Christian, he derived his philosophy of non-violent civil disobedience directly from Gandhi, who was not.

Then, too, there is improved education and, in particular, the increased understanding that each of us shares a common humanity with members of other races and with the other sex - both deeply unbiblical ideas that come from biological science, especially evolution. One reason black people and women and, in Nazi Germany, Jews and gypsies have been treated badly is that they were not perceived as fully human. The philosopher Peter Singer, in *Animal Liberation*, is the most eloquent advocate of the view that we should move to a post-speciesist condition in which humane treatment is meted out to all species that have the brain power to appreciate it. Perhaps this hints at the direction in which the moral *Zeitgeist* might move in future centuries. It would be a natural extrapolation of earlier reforms like the abolition of slavery and the emancipation of women.

It is beyond my amateur psychology and sociology to go any

further in explaining why the moral *Zeitgeist* moves in its broadly concerted way. For my purposes it is enough that, as a matter of observed fact, it *does* move, and it is not driven by religion - and certainly not by scripture. It is probably not a single force like gravity, but a complex interplay of disparate forces like the one that propels Moore's Law, describing the exponential increase in computer power. Whatever its cause, the manifest phenomenon of *Zeitgeist* progression is more than enough to undermine the claim that we need God in order to be good, or to decide what is good.

WHAT ABOUT HITLER AND STALIN? WEREN'T THEY ATHEISTS?

The *Zeitgeist* may move, and move in a generally progressive direction, but as I have said it is a sawtooth not a smooth improvement, and there have been some appalling reversals. Outstanding reversals, deep and terrible ones, are provided by the dictators of the twentieth century. It is important to separate the evil intentions of men like Hitler and Stalin from the vast power that they wielded in achieving them. I have already observed that Hitler's ideas and intentions were not self-evidently more evil than those of Caligula - or some of the Ottoman sultans, whose staggering feats of nastiness are described in Noel Barber's *Lords of the Golden Horn*. Hitler had twentieth-century weapons, and twentieth-century communications technology at his disposal. Nevertheless, Hitler and Stalin were, by any standards, spectacularly evil men.

'Hitler and Stalin were atheists. What have you got to say about that?' The question comes up after just about every public lecture that I ever give on the subject of religion, and in most of my radio interviews as well. It is put in a truculent way, indignantly freighted with two assumptions: not only (1) were Stalin and Hitler atheists, but (2) they did their terrible deeds *because* they were atheists. Assumption (1) is true for Stalin and dubious for Hitler. But assumption (1) is irrelevant anyway, because assumption (2) is false. It is certainly illogical if it is thought to follow from (1). Even

if we accept that Hitler and Stalin shared atheism in common, they both also had moustaches, as does Saddam Hussein. So what? The interesting question is not whether evil (or good) individual human beings were religious or were atheists. We are not in the business of counting evil heads and compiling two rival roll calls of iniquity. The fact that Nazi belt buckles were inscribed with '*Gott mit uns*' doesn't prove anything, at least not without a lot more discussion. What matters is not whether Hitler and Stalin were atheists, but whether atheism systematically *influences* people to do bad things. There is not the smallest evidence that it does.

There seems no doubt that, as a matter of fact, Stalin was an atheist. He received his education at an Orthodox seminary, and his mother never lost her disappointment that he had not entered the priesthood as she intended - a fact that, according to Alan Bullock, caused Stalin much amusement.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps because of his training for the priesthood, the mature Stalin was scathing about the Russian Orthodox Church, and about Christianity and religion in general. But there is no evidence that his atheism motivated his brutality. His earlier religious training probably didn't either, unless it was through teaching him to revere absolutist faith, strong authority and a belief that ends justify means.

The legend that Hitler was an atheist has been assiduously cultivated, so much so that a great many people believe it without question, and it is regularly and defiantly trotted out by religious apologists. The truth of the matter is far from clear. Hitler was born into a Catholic family, and went to Catholic schools and churches as a child. Obviously that is not significant in itself: he could easily have given it up, as Stalin gave up his Russian Orthodoxy after leaving the Tiflis Theological Seminary. But Hitler never formally renounced his Catholicism, and there are indications throughout his life that he remained religious. If not Catholic, he seems to have retained a belief in some sort of divine providence. For example he stated in *Mein Kampf* that, when he heard the news of the declaration of the First World War, 'I sank down on my knees and thanked Heaven out of the fullness of my heart for the favour of having been permitted to live in such a time.'¹⁰⁷ But that was 1914, when he was still only twenty-five. Perhaps he changed after that?

In 1920, when Hitler was thirty-one, his close associate Rudolf

Hess, later to be deputy Führer, wrote in a letter to the Prime Minister of Bavaria, 'I know Herr Hitler very well personally and am quite close to him. He has an unusually honourable character, full of profound kindness, is religious, a good Catholic.'¹⁰⁸ Of course, it could be said that, since Hess got the 'honourable character' and the 'profound kindness' so crashingly wrong, maybe he got the 'good Catholic' wrong too! Hitler could scarcely be described as a 'good' anything, which reminds me of the most comically audacious argument I have heard in favour of the proposition that Hitler must have been an atheist. Paraphrasing from many sources, Hitler was a bad man, Christianity teaches goodness, therefore Hitler can't have been a Christian! Goering's remark about Hitler, 'Only a Catholic could unite Germany,' might, I suppose, have meant somebody brought up Catholic rather than a believing Catholic.

In a speech of 1933 in Berlin, Hitler said, 'We were convinced that the people need and require this faith. We have therefore undertaken the fight against the atheistic movement, and that not merely with a few theoretical declarations: we have stamped it out.'¹⁰⁹ That might indicate only that, like many others, Hitler 'believed in belief. But as late as 1941 he told his adjutant, General Gerhard Engel, 'I shall remain a Catholic for ever.'

Even if he didn't remain a sincerely believing Christian, Hitler would have to have been positively unusual not to have been influenced by the long Christian tradition of blaming Jews as Christ-killers. In a speech in Munich in 1923, Hitler said, 'The first thing to do is to rescue [Germany] from the Jew who is ruining our country . . . We want to prevent our Germany from suffering, as Another did, the death upon the Cross.'¹¹⁰ In his *Adolf Hitler: The Definitive Biography*, John Toland wrote of Hitler's religious position at the time of the 'final solution':

Still a member in good standing of the Church of Rome despite detestation of its hierarchy, he carried within him its teaching that the Jew was the killer of god. The extermination, therefore, could be done without a twinge of conscience since he was merely acting as the avenging hand of god - so long as it was done impersonally, without cruelty.

Christian hatred of Jews is not just a Catholic tradition. Martin Luther was a virulent anti-Semite. At the Diet of Worms he said that 'All Jews should be driven from Germany.' And he wrote a whole book, *On the Jews and their Lies*, which probably influenced Hitler. Luther described the Jews as a 'brood of vipers', and the same phrase was used by Hitler in a remarkable speech of 1922, in which he several times repeated that he was a Christian:

My feeling as a Christian points me to my Lord and Saviour as a fighter. It points me to the man who once in loneliness, surrounded by a few followers, recognized these Jews for what they were and summoned men to fight against them and who, God's truth! was greatest not as a sufferer but as a fighter. In boundless love as a Christian and as a man I read through the passage which tells us how the Lord at last rose in His might and seized the scourge to drive out of the Temple the brood of vipers and adders. How terrific was His fight for the world against the Jewish poison. To-day, after two thousand years, with deepest emotion I recognize more profoundly than ever before the fact that it was for this that He had to shed His blood upon the Cross. As a Christian I have no duty to allow myself to be cheated, but I have the duty to be a fighter for truth and justice . . . And if there is anything which could demonstrate that we are acting rightly it is the distress that daily grows. For as a Christian I have also a duty to my own people.¹¹¹

It is hard to know whether Hitler picked up the phrase 'brood of vipers' from Luther, or whether he got it directly from Matthew 3: 7, as Luther presumably did. As for the theme of Jewish persecution as part of God's will, Hitler returned to it in *Mein Kampf*: 'Hence today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: *by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.*' That was 1925. He said it again in a speech in the Reichstag in 1938, and he said similar things throughout his career.

Quotations like those have to be balanced by others from his

Table Talk, in which Hitler expressed virulently anti-Christian views, as recorded by his secretary. The following all date from 1941:

The heaviest blow that ever struck humanity was the coming of Christianity. Bolshevism is Christianity's illegitimate child. Both are inventions of the Jew. The deliberate lie in the matter of religion was introduced into the world by Christianity . . .

The reason why the ancient world was so pure, light and serene was that it knew nothing of the two great scourges: the pox and Christianity.

When all is said, we have no reason to wish that the Italians and Spaniards should free themselves from the drug of Christianity. Let's be the only people who are immunised against the disease.

Hitler's *Table Talk* contains more quotations like those, often equating Christianity with Bolshevism, sometimes drawing an analogy between Karl Marx and St Paul and never forgetting that both were Jews (though Hitler, oddly, was always adamant that Jesus himself was not a Jew). It is possible that Hitler had by 1941 experienced some kind of deconversion or disillusionment with Christianity. Or is the resolution of the contradictions simply that he was an opportunistic liar whose words cannot be trusted, in either direction?

It could be argued that, despite his own words and those of his associates, Hitler was not really religious but just cynically exploiting the religiosity of his audience. He may have agreed with Napoleon, who said, 'Religion is excellent stuff for keeping common people quiet,' and with Seneca the Younger: 'Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful.' Nobody could deny that Hitler was capable of such insincerity. If this was his real motive for pretending to be religious, it serves to remind us that Hitler didn't carry out his atrocities single-handed. The terrible deeds themselves were carried out by soldiers and their officers, most of whom were surely Christian. Indeed, the Christianity of the German people underlies

the very hypothesis we are discussing - a hypothesis to explain the supposed insincerity of Hitler's religious professions! Or, perhaps Hitler felt that he had to display some token sympathy for Christianity, otherwise his regime would not have received the support it did from the Church. This support showed itself in various ways, including Pope Pius XII's persistent refusal to take a stand against the Nazis - a subject of considerable embarrassment to the modern Church. Either Hitler's professions of Christianity were sincere, or he faked his Christianity in order to win - successfully - co-operation from German Christians and the Catholic Church. In either case, the evils of Hitler's regime can hardly be held up as flowing from atheism.

Even when he was railing against Christianity, Hitler never ceased using the language of Providence: a mysterious agency which, he believed, had singled him out for a divine mission to lead Germany. He sometimes called it Providence, at other times God. After the *Anschluss*, when Hitler returned in triumph to Vienna in 1938, his exultant speech mentioned God in this providential guise: 'I believe it was God's will to send a boy from here into the Reich, to let him grow up and to raise him to be the leader of the nation so that he could lead back his homeland into the Reich.'¹¹²

When he narrowly escaped assassination in Munich in November 1939, Hitler credited Providence with intervening to save his life by causing him to alter his schedule: 'Now I am completely content. The fact that I left the Bürgerbraukeller earlier than usual is a corroboration of Providence's intention to let me reach my goal.'¹¹³ After this failed assassination the Archbishop of Munich, Cardinal Michael Faulhaber, ordered that a *Te Deum* should be said in his cathedral, 'To thank Divine Providence in the name of the archdiocese for the Führer's fortunate escape.' Some of Hitler's followers, with the support of Goebbels, made no bones about building Nazism into a religion in its own right. The following, by the chief of the united trade unions, has the feel of a prayer, and even has the cadences of the Christian Lord's Prayer ('Our Father') or the Creed:

Adolf Hitler! We are united with you alone! We want to renew our vow in this hour: On this earth we believe only

in Adolf Hitler. We believe that National Socialism is the sole saving faith for our people. We believe that there is a Lord God in heaven, who created us, who leads us, who directs us and who blesses us visibly. And we believe that this Lord God sent Adolf Hitler to us, so that Germany might become a foundation for all eternity.¹¹⁴

Stalin was an atheist and Hitler probably wasn't; but even if he was, the bottom line of the Stalin/Hitler debating point is very simple. Individual atheists may do evil things but they don't do evil things in the name of atheism. Stalin and Hitler did extremely evil things, in the name of, respectively, dogmatic and doctrinaire Marxism, and an insane and unscientific eugenics theory tinged with sub-Wagnerian ravings. Religious wars really are fought in the name of religion, and they have been horribly frequent in history. I cannot think of any war that has been fought in the name of atheism. Why should it? A war might be motivated by economic greed, by political ambition, by ethnic or racial prejudice, by deep grievance or revenge, or by patriotic belief in the destiny of a nation. Even more plausible as a motive for war is an unshakeable faith that one's own religion is the only true one, reinforced by a holy book that explicitly condemns all heretics and followers of rival religions to death, and explicitly promises that the soldiers of God will go straight to a martyrs' heaven. Sam Harris, as so often, hits the bullseye, in *The End of Faith*:

The danger of religious faith is that it allows otherwise normal human beings to reap the fruits of madness and consider them *holy*. Because each new generation of children is taught that religious propositions need not be justified in the way that all others must, civilization is still besieged by the armies of the preposterous. We are, even now, killing ourselves over ancient literature. Who would have thought something so tragically absurd could be possible?

By contrast, why would anyone go to war for the sake of an *absence* of belief?