

CHAPTER 8

What's wrong with religion? Why be so hostile?

Religion has actually convinced people that there's an invisible man - living in the sky - who watches everything you do, every minute of every day. And the invisible man has a special list of ten things he does not want you to do. And if you do any of these ten things, he has a special place, full of fire and smoke and burning and torture and anguish, where he will send you to live and suffer and burn and choke and scream and cry forever and ever 'til the end of time . . . But He loves you!

GEORGE CARLIN

I do not, by nature, thrive on confrontation. I don't think the adversarial format is well designed to get at the truth, and I regularly refuse invitations to take part in formal debates. I was once invited to debate with the then Archbishop of York, in Edinburgh. I felt honoured by this, and accepted. After the debate, the religious physicist Russell Stannard reproduced in his book *Doing Away with God?* a letter that he wrote to the *Observer*:

Sir, Under the gleeful headline 'God comes a poor Second before the Majesty of Science', your science correspondent reported (on Easter Sunday of all days) how Richard Dawkins 'inflicted grievous intellectual harm' on the Archbishop of York in a debate on science and religion. We were told of 'smugly smiling atheists' and 'Lions 10; Christians nil'.

Stannard went on to chide the *Observer* for failing to report a subsequent encounter between him and me, together with the Bishop of Birmingham and the distinguished cosmologist Sir Hermann Bondi, at the Royal Society, which had *not* been staged as an adversarial debate, and which had been a lot more constructive as a result. I can only agree with his implied condemnation of the adversarial debate format. In particular, for reasons explained in *A Devil's Chaplain*, I never take part in debates with creationists.*

Despite my dislike of gladiatorial contests, I seem somehow to have acquired a reputation for pugnacity towards religion. Colleagues who agree that there is no God, who agree that we do not need religion to be moral, and agree that we can explain the roots of religion and of morality in non-religious terms, nevertheless come back at me in gentle puzzlement. Why are you so hostile? What is actually wrong with religion? Does it really do so much harm that we should actively fight against it? Why not live and let live, as one does with Taurus and Scorpio, crystal energy and ley lines? Isn't it all just harmless nonsense?

I might retort that such hostility as I or other atheists occasionally voice towards religion is limited to words. I am not going to

* I do not have the *chutzpah* to refuse on the grounds offered by one of my most distinguished scientific colleagues, whenever a creationist tries to stage a formal debate with him (I shall not name him, but his words should be read in an Australian accent): 'That would look great on your CV; not so good on mine.'

bomb anybody, behead them, stone them, burn them at the stake, crucify them, or fly planes into their skyscrapers, just because of a theological disagreement. But my interlocutor usually doesn't leave it at that. He may go on to say something like this: 'Doesn't your hostility mark you out as a fundamentalist atheist, just as fundamentalist in your own way as the wingnuts of the Bible Belt in theirs?' I need to dispose of this accusation of fundamentalism, for it is distressingly common.

FUNDAMENTALISM AND THE SUBVERSION OF SCIENCE

Fundamentalists know they are right because they have read the truth in a holy book and they know, in advance, that nothing will budge them from their belief. The truth of the holy book is an axiom, not the end product of a process of reasoning. The book is true, and if the evidence seems to contradict it, it is the evidence that must be thrown out, not the book. By contrast, what I, as a scientist, believe (for example, evolution) I believe not because of reading a holy book but because I have studied the evidence. It really is a very different matter. Books about evolution are believed not because they are holy. They are believed because they present overwhelming quantities of mutually buttressed evidence. In principle, any reader can go and check that evidence. When a science book is wrong, somebody eventually discovers the mistake and it is corrected in subsequent books. That conspicuously doesn't happen with holy books.

Philosophers, especially amateurs with a little philosophical learning, and even more especially those infected with 'cultural relativism', may raise a tiresome red herring at this point: a scientist's belief in *evidence* is itself a matter of fundamentalist faith. I have dealt with this elsewhere, and will only briefly repeat myself here. All of us believe in evidence in our own lives, whatever we may profess with our amateur philosophical hats on. If I am accused of murder, and prosecuting counsel sternly asks me

whether it is true that I was in Chicago on the night of the crime, I cannot get away with a philosophical evasion: 'It depends what you mean by "true".' Nor with an anthropological, relativist plea: 'It is only in your Western scientific sense of "in" that I was in Chicago. The Bongolese have a completely different concept of "in", according to which you are only truly "in" a place if you are an anointed elder entitled to take snuff from the dried scrotum of a goat.'¹⁵

Maybe scientists are fundamentalist when it comes to defining in some abstract way what is meant by 'truth'. But so is everybody else. I am no more fundamentalist when I say evolution is true than when I say it is true that New Zealand is in the southern hemisphere. We believe in evolution because the evidence supports it, and we would abandon it overnight if new evidence arose to disprove it. No real fundamentalist would ever say anything like that.

It is all too easy to confuse fundamentalism with passion. I may well appear passionate when I defend evolution against a fundamentalist creationist, but this is not because of a rival fundamentalism of my own. It is because the evidence for evolution is overwhelmingly strong and I am passionately distressed that my opponent can't see it - or, more usually, refuses to look at it because it contradicts his holy book. My passion is increased when I think about how much the poor fundamentalists, and those whom they influence, are *missing*. The truths of evolution, along with many other scientific truths, are so engrossingly fascinating and beautiful; how truly tragic to die having missed out on all that! Of course that makes me passionate. How could it not? But my belief in evolution is not fundamentalism, and it is not faith, because I know what it would take to change my mind, and I would gladly do so if the necessary evidence were forthcoming.

It does happen. I have previously told the story of a respected elder statesman of the Zoology Department at Oxford when I was an undergraduate. For years he had passionately believed, and taught, that the Golgi Apparatus (a microscopic feature of the interior of cells) was not real: an artefact, an illusion. Every Monday afternoon it was the custom for the whole department to listen to a research talk by a visiting lecturer. One Monday, the visitor was an American cell biologist who presented completely convincing evidence that the Golgi Apparatus was real. At the end

of the lecture, the old man strode to the front of the hall, shook the American by the hand and said - with passion - 'My dear fellow, I wish to thank you. I have been wrong these fifteen years.' We clapped our hands red. No fundamentalist would ever say that. In practice, not all scientists would. But all scientists pay lip service to it as an ideal - unlike, say, politicians who would probably condemn it as flip-flopping. The memory of the incident I have described still brings a lump to my throat.

As a scientist, I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise. It teaches us not to change our minds, and not to want to know exciting things that are available to be known. It subverts science and saps the intellect. The saddest example I know is that of the American geologist Kurt Wise, who now directs the Center for Origins Research at Bryan College, Dayton, Tennessee. It is no accident that Bryan College is named after William Jennings Bryan, prosecutor of the science teacher John Scopes in the Dayton 'Monkey Trial' of 1925. Wise could have fulfilled his boyhood ambition to become a professor of geology at a real university, a university whose motto might have been 'Think critically' rather than the oxymoronic one displayed on the Bryan website: 'Think critically and biblically'. Indeed, he obtained a real degree in geology at the University of Chicago, followed by two higher degrees in geology and paleontology at Harvard (no less) where he studied under Stephen Jay Gould (no less). He was a highly qualified and genuinely promising young scientist, well on his way to achieving his dream of teaching science and doing research at a proper university.

Then tragedy struck. It came, not from outside but from within his own mind, a mind fatally subverted and weakened by a fundamentalist religious upbringing that required him to believe that the Earth - the subject of his Chicago and Harvard geological education - was less than ten thousand years old. He was too intelligent not to recognize the head-on collision between his religion and his science, and the conflict in his mind made him increasingly uneasy. One day, he could bear the strain no more, and he clinched the matter with a pair of scissors. He took a bible and went right through it, literally cutting out every verse that would have to go if the scientific world-view were true. At the end of this ruthlessly honest and

labour-intensive exercise, there was so little left of his bible that,

try as I might, and even with the benefit of intact margins throughout the pages of Scripture, I found it impossible to pick up the Bible without it being rent in two. I had to make a decision between evolution and Scripture. Either the Scripture was true and evolution was wrong or evolution was true and I must toss out the Bible . . . It was there that night that I accepted the Word of God and rejected all that would ever counter it, including evolution. With that, in great sorrow, I tossed into the fire all my dreams and hopes in science.

I find that terribly sad; but whereas the Golgi Apparatus story moved me to tears of admiration and exultation, the Kurt Wise story is just plain pathetic - pathetic and contemptible. The wound, to his career and his life's happiness, was self-inflicted, so unnecessary, so easy to escape. All he had to do was toss out the bible. Or interpret it symbolically, or allegorically, as the theologians do. Instead, he did the fundamentalist thing and tossed out science, evidence and reason, along with all his dreams and hopes.

Perhaps uniquely among fundamentalists, Kurt Wise is honest - devastatingly, painfully, shockingly honest. Give him the Templeton Prize; he might be the first really sincere recipient. Wise brings to the surface what is secretly going on underneath, in the minds of fundamentalists generally, when they encounter scientific evidence that contradicts their beliefs. Listen to his peroration:

Although there are scientific reasons for accepting a young earth, I am a young-age creationist because that is my understanding of the Scripture. As I shared with my professors years ago when I was in college, if all the evidence in the universe turns against creationism, I would be the first to admit it, but I would still be a creationist because that is what the Word of God seems to indicate. Here I must stand.¹¹⁶

He seems to be quoting Luther as he nailed his theses to the door

of the church in Wittenberg, but poor Kurt Wise reminds me more of Winston Smith in 1984 - struggling desperately to believe that two plus two equals five if Big Brother says it does. Winston, however, was being tortured. Wise's doublethink comes not from the imperative of physical torture but from the imperative - apparently just as undeniable to some people - of religious faith: arguably a form of mental torture. I am hostile to religion because of what it did to Kurt Wise. And if it did that to a Harvard-educated geologist, just think what it can do to others less gifted and less well armed.

Fundamentalist religion is hell-bent on ruining the scientific education of countless thousands of innocent, well-meaning, eager young minds. Non-fundamentalist, 'sensible' religion may not be doing that. But it is making the world safe for fundamentalism by teaching children, from their earliest years, that unquestioning faith is a virtue.

THE DARK SIDE OF ABSOLUTISM

In the previous chapter, when trying to explain the shifting moral *Zeitgeist*, I invoked a widespread consensus of liberal, enlightened, decent people. I made the rosy-spectacled assumption that 'we' all broadly agree with this consensus, some more than others, and I had in mind most of the people likely to read this book, whether they are religious or not. But of course, not everybody is of the consensus (and not everybody will have any desire to read my book). It has to be admitted that absolutism is far from dead. Indeed, it rules the minds of a great number of people in the world today, most dangerously so in the Muslim world and in the incipient American theocracy (see Kevin Phillips's book of that name). Such absolutism nearly always results from strong religious faith, and it constitutes a major reason for suggesting that religion can be a force for evil in the world.

One of the fiercest penalties in the Old Testament is the one exacted for blasphemy. It is still in force in certain countries. Section 295-C of the Pakistan penal code prescribes the death

penalty for this 'crime'. On 18 August 2001, Dr Younis Shaikh, a medical doctor and lecturer, was sentenced to death for blasphemy. His particular crime was to tell students that the prophet Muhammad was not a Muslim before he invented the religion at the age of forty. Eleven of his students reported him to the authorities for this 'offence'. The blasphemy law in Pakistan is more usually invoked against Christians, such as Augustine Ashiq 'Kingri' Masih, who was sentenced to death in Faisalabad in 2000. Masih, as a Christian, was not allowed to marry his sweetheart because she was a Muslim and - incredibly - Pakistani (and Islamic) law does not allow a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man. So he tried to convert to Islam and was then accused of doing so for base motives. It is not clear from the report I have read whether this in itself was the capital crime, or whether it was something he is alleged to have said about the prophet's own morals. Either way, it certainly was not the kind of offence that would warrant a death sentence in any country whose laws are free of religious bigotry.

In 2006 in Afghanistan, Abdul Rahman was sentenced to death for converting to Christianity. Did he kill anyone, hurt anybody, steal anything, damage anything? No. All he did was change his mind. Internally and privately, he changed his mind. He entertained certain *thoughts* which were not to the liking of the ruling party of his country. And this, remember, is not the Afghanistan of the Taliban but the 'liberated' Afghanistan of Hamid Karzai, set up by the American-led coalition. Mr Rahman finally escaped execution, but only on a plea of insanity, and only after intense international pressure. He has now sought asylum in Italy, to avoid being murdered by zealots eager to do their Islamic duty. It is still an article of the *constitution* of 'liberated' Afghanistan that the penalty for apostasy is death. Apostasy, remember, doesn't mean actual harm to persons or property. It is pure thoughtcrime, to use George Orwell's 1984 terminology, and the official punishment for it under Islamic law is death. On 3 September 1992, to take one example where it was actually carried out, Sadiq Abdul Karim Malallah was publicly beheaded in Saudi Arabia after being lawfully convicted of apostasy and blasphemy.¹¹⁷

I once had a televised encounter with Sir Iqbal Sacranie,

mentioned in Chapter 1 as Britain's leading 'moderate' Muslim. I challenged him on the death penalty as punishment for apostasy. He wriggled and squirmed, but was unable either to deny or decry it. He kept trying to change the subject, saying it was an unimportant detail. This is a man who has been knighted by the British government for promoting good 'interfaith relations'.

But let's have no complacency in Christendom. As recently as 1922 in Britain, John William Gott was sentenced to nine months' hard labour for blasphemy: he compared Jesus to a clown. Almost unbelievably, the crime of blasphemy is still on the statute book in Britain,¹¹⁸ and in 2005 a Christian group tried to bring a private prosecution for blasphemy against the BBC for broadcasting *Jerry Springer, the Opera*.

In the United States of recent years the phrase 'American Taliban' was begging to be coined, and a swift Google search nets more than a dozen websites that have done so. The quotations that they anthologize, from American religious leaders and faith-based politicians, chillingly recall the narrow bigotry, heartless cruelty and sheer nastiness of the Afghan Taliban, the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Wahhabi authorities of Saudi Arabia. The web page called 'The American Taliban' is a particularly rich source of obnoxiously barmy quotations, beginning with a prize one from somebody called Ann Coulter who, American colleagues have persuaded me, is not a spoof, invented by *The Onion*: 'We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity.'¹¹⁹ Other gems include Congressman Bob Dornan's 'Don't use the word "gay" unless it's an acronym for "Got Aids Yet?"', General William G. Boykin's 'George Bush was not elected by a majority of the voters in the United States, he was appointed by God' - and an older one, the famous environmental policy of Ronald Reagan's Secretary of the Interior: 'We don't have to protect the environment, the Second Coming is at hand.' The Afghan Taliban and the American Taliban are good examples of what happens when people take their scriptures literally and seriously. They provide a horrifying modern enactment of what life might have been like under the theocracy of the Old Testament. Kimberly Blaker's *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* is a book-length expose of the menace of the Christian Taliban (not under that name).

FAITH AND HOMOSEXUALITY

In Afghanistan under the Taliban, the official punishment for homosexuality was execution, by the tasteful method of burial alive under a wall pushed over on top of the victim. The 'crime' itself being a private act, performed by consenting adults who were doing nobody else any harm, we again have here the classic hallmark of religious absolutism. My own country has no right to be smug. Private homosexuality was a criminal offence in Britain up until - astonishingly - 1967. In 1954 the British mathematician Alan Turing, a candidate along with John von Neumann for the title of father of the computer, committed suicide after being convicted of the criminal offence of homosexual behaviour in private. Admittedly Turing was not buried alive under a wall pushed over by a tank. He was offered a choice between two years in prison (you can imagine how the other prisoners would have treated him) and a course of hormone injections which could be said to amount to chemical castration, and would have caused him to grow breasts. His final, private choice was an apple that he had injected with cyanide.¹²⁰

As the pivotal intellect in the breaking of the German Enigma codes, Turing arguably made a greater contribution to defeating the Nazis than Eisenhower or Churchill. Thanks to Turing and his 'Ultra' colleagues at Bletchley Park, Allied generals in the field were consistently, over long periods of the war, privy to detailed German plans before the German generals had time to implement them. After the war, when Turing's role was no longer top secret, he should have been knighted and feted as a saviour of his nation. Instead, this gentle, stammering, eccentric genius was destroyed, for a 'crime', committed in private, which harmed nobody. Once again, the unmistakable trademark of the faith-based moralizer is to care passionately about what other people do (or even think) in *private*.

The attitude of the 'American Taliban' towards homosexuality epitomizes their religious absolutism. Listen to the Reverend Jerry Falwell, founder of Liberty University: 'AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals; it is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.'¹²¹ The thing I notice first about such

people is their wonderful Christian charity. What kind of an electorate could, term after term, vote in a man of such ill-informed bigotry as Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina? A man who has sneered: *'The New York Times and Washington Post* are both infested with homosexuals themselves. Just about every person down there is a homosexual or lesbian.'¹²² The answer, I suppose, is the kind of electorate that sees morality in narrowly religious terms and feels threatened by anybody who doesn't share the same absolutist faith.

I have already quoted Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition. He stood as a serious candidate for the Republican party nomination for President in 1988, and garnered more than three million volunteers to work in his campaign, plus a comparable quantity of money: a disquieting level of support, given that the following quotations are entirely typical of him: '[Homosexuals] want to come into churches and disrupt church services and throw blood all around and try to give people AIDS and spit in the face of ministers.' '[Planned Parenthood] is teaching kids to fornicate, teaching people to have adultery, every kind of bestiality, homosexuality, lesbianism - everything that the Bible condemns.' Robertson's attitude to women, too, would warm the black hearts of the Afghan Taliban: 'I know this is painful for the ladies to hear, but if you get married, you have accepted the headship of a man, your husband. Christ is the head of the household and the husband is the head of the wife, and that's the way it is, period.'

Gary Potter, President of Catholics for Christian Political Action, had this to say: 'When the Christian majority takes over this country, there will be no satanic churches, no more free distribution of pornography, no more talk of rights for homosexuals. After the Christian majority takes control, pluralism will be seen as immoral and evil and the state will not permit anybody the right to practice evil.' 'Evil', as is very clear from the quotation, doesn't mean doing things that have bad consequences for people. It means private thoughts and actions that are not to 'the Christian majority's' private liking.

Pastor Fred Phelps, of the Westboro Baptist Church, is another strong preacher with an obsessive dislike of homosexuals. When Martin Luther King's widow died, Pastor Fred organized a picket

of her funeral, proclaiming: 'God Hates Fags &C Fag-Enablers! Ergo, God hates Coretta Scott King and is now tormenting her with fire and brimstone where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched, and the smoke of her torment ascendeth up for ever and ever.'¹²³ It is easy to write Fred Phelps off as a nut, but he has plenty of support from people and their money. According to his own website, Phelps has organized 22,000 anti-homosexual demonstrations since 1991 (that's an average of one every four days) in the USA, Canada, Jordan and Iraq, displaying slogans such as 'THANK GOD FOR AIDS'. A particularly charming feature of his website is the automated tally of the number of days a particular, named, deceased homosexual has been burning in hell.

Attitudes to homosexuality reveal much about the sort of morality that is inspired by religious faith. An equally instructive example is abortion and the sanctity of human life.

FAITH AND THE SANCTITY OF HUMAN LIFE

Human embryos are examples of human life. Therefore, by absolutist religious lights, abortion is simply wrong: full-fledged murder. I am not sure what to make of my admittedly anecdotal observation that many of those who most ardently oppose the taking of embryonic life also seem to be more than usually enthusiastic about taking adult life. To be fair, this does not, as a rule, apply to Roman Catholics, who are among the most vociferous opponents of abortion. The born-again George W. Bush, however, is typical of today's religious ascendancy. He, and they, are stalwart defenders of human life, as long as it is embryonic life (or terminally ill life) - even to the point of preventing medical research that would certainly save many lives.¹²⁴ The obvious ground for opposing the death penalty is respect for human life. Since 1976, when the Supreme Court reversed the ban on the death penalty, Texas has been responsible for more than one-third of all executions in all fifty states of the Union. And Bush presided over more executions in Texas than any other governor in the state's history, averaging one death every nine days. Perhaps he was simply

doing his duty and carrying out the laws of the state?¹²⁵ But then, *what are we to make of the famous report by the CNN journalist Tucker Carlson?* Carlson, who himself supports the death penalty, was shocked by Bush's 'humorous' imitation of a female prisoner on death row, pleading to the Governor for a stay of execution: "Please," Bush whimpers, his lips pursed in mock desperation, "Don't kill me."¹²⁶ Perhaps this woman would have met with more sympathy if she had pointed out that she had once been an embryo. The contemplation of embryos really does seem to have the most extraordinary effect upon many people of faith. Mother Teresa of Calcutta actually said, in her speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize, 'The greatest destroyer of peace is abortion.' *What?* How can a woman with such cock-eyed judgement be taken seriously on any topic, let alone be thought seriously worthy of a Nobel Prize? Anybody tempted to be taken in by the sanctimoniously hypocritical Mother Teresa should read Christopher Hitchens's book *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*.

Returning to the American Taliban, listen to Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue, an organization for intimidating abortion providers. 'When I, or people like me, are running the country, you'd better flee, because we will find you, we will try you, and we'll execute you. I mean every word of it. I will make it part of my mission to see to it that they are tried and executed.' Terry was here referring to doctors who provide abortions, and his Christian inspiration is clearly shown by other statements:

I want you to just let a wave of intolerance wash over you. I want you to let a wave of hatred wash over you. Yes, hate is good ... Our goal is a Christian nation. We have a Biblical duty, we are called by God, to conquer this country. We don't want equal time. We don't want pluralism.

Our goal must be simple. We must have a Christian nation built on God's law, on the Ten Commandments. No apologies.¹²⁷

This ambition to achieve what can only be called a Christian fascist state is entirely typical of the American Taliban. It is an almost

exact mirror image of the Islamic fascist state so ardently sought by many people in other parts of the world. Randall Terry is not - yet - in political power. But no observer of the American political scene at the time of writing (2006) can afford to be sanguine.

A consequentialist or utilitarian is likely to approach the abortion question in a very different way, by trying to weigh up suffering. Does the embryo suffer? (Presumably not if it is aborted before it has a nervous system; and even if it is old enough to have a nervous system it surely suffers less than, say, an adult cow in a slaughterhouse.) Does the pregnant woman, or her family, suffer if she does not have an abortion? Very possibly so; and, in any case, given that the embryo lacks a nervous system, shouldn't the mother's well-developed nervous system have the choice?

This is not to deny that a consequentialist might have grounds to oppose abortion. 'Slippery slope' arguments can be framed by consequentialists (though I wouldn't in this case). Maybe embryos don't suffer, but a culture that tolerates the taking of human life risks going too far: where will it all end? In infanticide? The moment of birth provides a natural Rubicon for defining rules, and one could argue that it is hard to find another one earlier in embryonic development. Slippery slope arguments could therefore lead us to give the moment of birth more significance than utilitarianism, narrowly interpreted, would prefer.

Arguments against euthanasia, too, can be framed in slippery slope terms. Let's invent an imaginary quotation from a moral philosopher: 'If you allow doctors to put terminal patients out of their agony, the next thing you know everybody will be bumping off their granny to get her money. We philosophers may have grown out of absolutism, but society needs the discipline of absolute rules such as "Thou shalt not kill," otherwise it doesn't know where to stop. Under some circumstances absolutism might, for all the wrong reasons in a less than ideal world, have better *consequences* than naive consequentialism! We philosophers might have a hard time prohibiting the eating of people who were already dead and unmourned - say road-killed tramps. But, for slippery slope reasons, the absolutist taboo against cannibalism is too valuable to lose.'

Slippery slope arguments might be seen as a way in which

consequentialists can reimport a form of indirect absolutism. But the religious foes of abortion don't bother with slippery slopes. For them, the issue is much simpler. An embryo is a 'baby', killing it is murder, and that's that: end of discussion. Much follows from this absolutist stance. For a start, embryonic stem-cell research must cease, despite its huge potential for medical science, because it entails the deaths of embryonic cells. The inconsistency is apparent when you reflect that society already accepts IVF (in vitro fertilization), in which doctors routinely stimulate women to produce surplus eggs, to be fertilized outside the body. As many as a dozen viable zygotes may be produced, of which two or three are then implanted in the uterus. The expectation is that, of these, only one or possibly two will survive. IVF, therefore, kills conceptuses at two stages of the procedure, and society in general has no problem with this. For twenty-five years, IVF has been a standard procedure for bringing joy into the lives of childless couples.

Religious absolutists, however, can have problems with IVF. The *Guardian* of 3 June 2005 carried a bizarre story under the headline 'Christian couples answer call to save embryos left by IVF'. The story is about an organization called Snowflakes which seeks to 'rescue' surplus embryos left over at IVF clinics. 'We really felt like the Lord was calling us to try to give one of these embryos - these children - a chance to live,' said a woman in Washington State, whose fourth child resulted from this 'unexpected alliance that conservative Christians have been forming with the world of test-tube babies'. Worried about that alliance, her husband had consulted a church elder, who advised, 'If you want to free the slaves, you sometimes have to make a deal with the slave trader.' I wonder what these people would say if they knew that the majority of conceived embryos spontaneously abort anyway. It is probably best seen as a kind of natural 'quality control'.

A certain kind of religious mind cannot see the moral difference between killing a microscopic cluster of cells on the one hand, and killing a full-grown doctor on the other. I have already quoted Randall Terry and 'Operation Rescue'. Mark Juergensmeyer, in his chilling book *Terror in the Mind of God*, prints a photograph of the Reverend Michael Bray with his friend the Reverend Paul Hill, holding a banner reading: 'Is it wrong to stop the murder of

innocent babies?' Both look like nice, rather preppy young men, smiling engagingly, casually well-dressed, the very opposite of staring-eyed loonies. Yet they and their friends of the Army of God (AOG) made it their business to set fire to abortion clinics, and they have made no secret of their desire to kill doctors. On 29 July 1994, Paul Hill took a shotgun and murdered Dr John Britton and his bodyguard James Barrett outside Britton's clinic in Pensacola, Florida. He then gave himself up to the police, saying he had killed the doctor to prevent the future deaths of 'innocent babies'.

Michael Bray defends such actions articulately and with every appearance of high moral purpose, as I discovered when I interviewed him, in a public park in Colorado Springs, for my television documentary on religion.* Before coming on to the abortion question, I got the measure of Bray's Bible-based morality by asking him some preliminary questions. I pointed out that biblical law condemns adulterers to death by stoning. I expected him to disavow this particular example as obviously beyond the pale, but he surprised me. He was happy to agree that, after due process of law, adulterers should be executed. I then pointed out that Paul Hill, with Bray's full support, had not followed due process but had taken the law into his own hands and killed a doctor. Bray defended his fellow clergyman's action in the same terms as he had when Juergensmeyer interviewed him, making a distinction between retributive killing, say of a retired doctor, and killing a practising doctor as a means of preventing him from 'regularly killing babies'. I then put it to him that, sincere though Paul Hill's beliefs no doubt were, society would descend into a terrible anarchy if everybody invoked personal conviction in order to take the law into their own hands, rather than abiding by the law of the land. Wasn't the right course to try to get the law changed, democratically? Bray replied: 'Well, this is the problem when we don't have law that's really authentic law; when we have laws that are made up by people on the spot, capriciously, as we have seen in the case of the so-called law of abortion rights, that was imposed upon the people by judges . . .' We then got into an argument about the American constitution and where laws come from. Bray's attitude to such matters turned out to be very reminiscent of those militant Muslims

* The animal liberationists who threaten violence against scientists using animals for medical research would claim an equally high moral purpose.

living in Britain who openly announce themselves as bound only by Islamic law, not by the democratically enacted laws of their adopted country.

In 2003 Paul Hill was executed for the murder of Dr Britton and his bodyguard, saying he would do it again to save the unborn. Candidly looking forward to dying for his cause, he told a news conference, 'I believe the state, by executing me, will be making me a martyr.' Right-wing anti-abortionists protesting at his execution were joined in unholy alliance by left-wing opponents of the death penalty who urged the Governor of Florida, Jeb Bush, to 'stop the martyrdom of Paul Hill'. They plausibly argued that the judicial killing of Hill would actually encourage more murders, the precise opposite of the deterrent effect that the death penalty is supposed to have. Hill himself smiled all the way to the execution chamber, saying, 'I expect a great reward in heaven . . . I am looking forward to glory.'¹²⁸ And he suggested that others should take up his violent cause. Anticipating revenge attacks for the 'martyrdom' of Paul Hill, the police went on heightened alert as he was executed, and several individuals connected with the case received threatening letters accompanied by bullets.

This whole terrible business stems from a simple difference of perception. There are people who, because of their religious convictions, think abortion is murder and are prepared to kill in defence of embryos, which they choose to call 'babies'. On the other side are equally sincere supporters of abortion, who either have different religious convictions, or no religion, coupled with well-thought-out consequentialist morals. They too see themselves as idealists, providing a medical service for patients in need, who would otherwise go to dangerously incompetent back-street quacks. Both sides see the other side as murderers or advocates of murder. Both sides, by their own lights, are equally sincere.

A spokeswoman for another abortion clinic described Paul Hill as a dangerous psychopath. But people like him don't think of themselves as dangerous psychopaths; they think of themselves as good, moral people, guided by God. Indeed, I don't think Paul Hill was a psychopath. Just very religious. Dangerous, yes, but not a psychopath. Dangerously religious. By the lights of his religious faith, Hill was entirely right and moral to shoot Dr Britton. What

was wrong with Hill was his religious faith itself. Michael Bray, too, when I met him, didn't strike me as a psychopath. I actually quite liked him. I thought he was an honest and sincere man, quietly spoken and thoughtful, but his mind had unfortunately been captured by poisonous religious nonsense.

Strong opponents of abortion are almost all deeply religious. The sincere supporters of abortion, whether personally religious or not, are likely to follow a non-religious, consequentialist moral philosophy, perhaps invoking Jeremy Bentham's question, 'Can they *suffer*?' Paul Hill and Michael Bray saw no moral difference between killing an embryo and killing a doctor except that the embryo was, to them, a blamelessly innocent 'baby'. The consequentialist sees all the difference in the world. An early embryo has the sentience, as well as the semblance, of a tadpole. A doctor is a grown-up conscious being with hopes, loves, aspirations, fears, a massive store of humane knowledge, the capacity for deep emotion, very probably a devastated widow and orphaned children, perhaps elderly parents who dote on him.

Paul Hill caused real, deep, lasting suffering, to beings with nervous systems capable of suffering. His doctor victim did no such thing. Early embryos that have no nervous system most certainly do not suffer. And if late-aborted embryos with nervous systems suffer - though all suffering is deplorable - it is not because they are *human* that they suffer. There is no general reason to suppose that human embryos at any age suffer more than cow or sheep embryos at the same developmental stage. And there is every reason to suppose that all embryos, whether human or not, suffer far less than adult cows or sheep in a slaughterhouse, especially a ritual slaughterhouse where, for religious reasons, they must be fully conscious when their throats are ceremonially cut.

Suffering is hard to measure,¹²⁹ and the details might be disputed. But that doesn't affect my main point, which concerns the difference between secular consequentialist and religiously absolute moral philosophies.* One school of thought cares about whether embryos can suffer. The other cares about whether they are human. Religious moralists can be heard debating questions like, 'When does the developing embryo become a person - a human being?'

* This doesn't, of course, exhaust the possibilities. A substantial majority of American Christians do not take an absolutist attitude to abortion, and are pro-choice. See e.g. the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, at www.rcrc.org/.

Secular moralists are more likely to ask, 'Never mind whether it is *human* (what does that even *mean* for a little cluster of cells?); at what age does any developing embryo, of any species, become capable of *suffering*!'"

THE GREAT BEETHOVEN FALLACY

The anti-abortionist's next move in the verbal chess game usually goes something like this. The point is not whether a human embryo can or cannot suffer at present. The point lies in its *potential*. Abortion has deprived it of the opportunity for a full human life in the future. This notion is epitomized by a rhetorical argument whose extreme stupidity is its only defence against a charge of serious dishonesty. I am speaking of the Great Beethoven Fallacy, which exists in several forms. Peter and Jean Medawar,* in *The Life Science*, attribute the following version to Norman St John Stevas (now Lord St John), a British Member of Parliament and prominent Roman Catholic layman. He, in turn, got it from Maurice Baring (1874-1945), a noted Roman Catholic convert and close associate of those Catholic stalwarts G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. He cast it in the form of a hypothetical dialogue between two doctors.

'About the terminating of pregnancy, I want your opinion. The father was syphilitic, the mother tuberculous. Of the four children born, the first was blind, the second died, the third was deaf and dumb, the fourth was also tuberculous. What would you have done?'

'I would have terminated the pregnancy.'

'Then you would have murdered Beethoven.'

The Internet is riddled with so-called pro-life web sites that repeat this ridiculous story, and incidentally change factual premises with wanton abandon. Here's another version. 'If you knew a woman who was pregnant, who had 8 kids already, three of whom were deaf, two who were blind, one mentally retarded (all

* Sir Peter Medawar won the Nobel Prize for Physiology **and** Medicine, 1960.

because she had syphilis), would you recommend that she have an abortion? Then you would have killed Beethoven.¹³⁰ This rendering of the legend demotes the great composer from fifth to ninth in the birth order, raises the number born deaf to three and the number born blind to two, and gives syphilis to the mother instead of the father. Most of the forty-three websites I found when searching for versions of the story attribute it not to Maurice Baring but to a certain Professor L. R. Agnew at UCLA Medical School, who is said to have put the dilemma to his students and to have told them, 'Congratulations, you have just murdered Beethoven.' We might charitably give L. R. Agnew the benefit of doubting his existence - it is amazing how these urban legends sprout. I cannot discover whether it was Baring who originated the legend, or whether it was invented earlier.

For invented it certainly was. It is completely false. The truth is that Ludwig van Beethoven was neither the ninth child nor the fifth child of his parents. He was the eldest - strictly the number two, but his elder sibling died in infancy, as was common in those days, and was not, so far as is known, blind or deaf or dumb or mentally retarded. There is no evidence that either of his parents had syphilis, although it is true that his mother eventually died of tuberculosis. There was a lot of it about at the time.

This is, in fact, a fully fledged urban legend, a fabrication, deliberately disseminated by people with a vested interest in spreading it. But the fact that it is a lie is, in any case, completely beside the point. Even if it were not a lie, the argument derived from it is a very bad argument indeed. Peter and Jean Medawar had no need to doubt the truth of the story in order to point out the fallacy of the argument: 'The reasoning behind this odious little argument is breathtakingly fallacious, for unless it is being suggested that there is some causal connection between having a tubercular mother and a syphilitic father and giving birth to a musical genius the world is no more likely to be deprived of a Beethoven by abortion than by chaste abstinence from intercourse.'¹³¹ The Medawars' laconically scornful dismissal is unanswerable (to borrow the plot of one of Roald Dahl's dark short stories, an equally fortuitous decision *not* to have an abortion in 1888 gave us Adolf Hitler). But you do need a modicum of intelligence - or perhaps freedom from a certain kind

of religious upbringing - to get the point. Of the forty-three 'pro-life' websites quoting a version of the Beethoven legend which my Google search turned up on the day of writing, not a single one spotted the illogic in the argument. Every one of them (they were all religious sites, by the way) fell for the fallacy, hook, line and sinker. One of them even acknowledged Medawar (spelled Medawar) as the source. So eager were these people to believe a fallacy congenial to their faith, they didn't even notice that the Medawars had quoted the argument solely in order to blow it out of the water.

As the Medawars were entirely right to point out, the logical conclusion to the 'human potential' argument is that we potentially deprive a human soul of the gift of existence every time we fail to seize any opportunity for sexual intercourse. Every refusal of any offer of copulation by a fertile individual is, by this dopey 'pro-life' logic, tantamount to the murder of a potential child! Even resisting rape could be represented as murdering a potential baby (and, by the way, there are plenty of 'pro-life' campaigners who would deny abortion even to women who have been brutally raped). The Beethoven argument is, we can clearly see, very bad logic indeed. Its surreal idiocy is best summed up in that splendid song 'Every sperm is sacred' sung by Michael Palin, with a chorus of hundreds of children, in the Monty Python film *The Meaning of Life* (if you haven't seen it, please do). The Great Beethoven Fallacy is a typical example of the kind of logical mess we get into when our minds are befuddled by religiously inspired absolutism.

Notice now that 'pro-life' doesn't exactly mean *pro-life* at all. It means *pro-human-lite*. The granting of uniquely special rights to cells of the species *Homo sapiens* is hard to reconcile with the fact of evolution. Admittedly, this will not worry those many anti-abortionists who don't understand that evolution *is* a fact! But let me briefly spell out the argument for the benefit of anti-abortion activists who may be less ignorant of science.

The evolutionary point is very simple. The *humanness* of an embryo's cells cannot confer upon it any absolutely discontinuous moral status. It cannot, because of our evolutionary continuity with chimpanzees and, more distantly, with every species on the planet. To see this, imagine that an intermediate species, say

Australopithecus afarensis, had chanced to survive and was discovered in a remote part of Africa. Would these creatures 'count as human' or not? To a consequentialist like me, the question doesn't deserve an answer, for nothing turns on it. It is enough that we would be fascinated and honoured to meet a new 'Lucy'. The absolutist, on the other hand, must answer the question, in order to apply the moral principle of granting humans unique and special status *because they are human*. If it came to the crunch, they would presumably need to set up courts, like those of apartheid South Africa, to decide whether a particular individual should 'pass for human'.

Even if a clear answer might be attempted for *Australopithecus*, the gradual continuity that is an inescapable feature of biological evolution tells us that there must be *some* intermediate who would lie sufficiently close to the 'borderline' to blur the moral principle and destroy its absoluteness. A better way to say this is that there are no natural borderlines in evolution. The illusion of a borderline is created by the fact that the evolutionary intermediates happen to be extinct. Of course, it could be argued that humans are more capable of, for example, suffering than other species. This could well be true, and we might legitimately give humans special status by virtue of it. But evolutionary continuity shows that there is no *absolute* distinction. Absolutist moral discrimination is devastatingly undermined by the fact of evolution. An uneasy awareness of this fact might, indeed, underlie one of the main motives creationists have for opposing evolution: they fear what they believe to be its moral consequences. They are wrong to do so but, in any case, it is surely very odd to think that a truth about the real world can be reversed by considerations of what would be morally desirable.

HOW 'MODERATION' IN FAITH FOSTERS FANATICISM

In illustration of the dark side of absolutism, I mentioned the Christians in America who blow up abortion clinics, and the

Taliban of Afghanistan, whose list of cruelties, especially to women, I find too painful to recount. I could have expanded upon Iran under the ayatollahs, or Saudi Arabia under the Saud princes, where women cannot drive, and are in trouble if they even leave their homes without a male relative (who may, as a generous concession, be a small male child). See Jan Goodwin's *Price of Honour* for a devastating expose of the treatment of women in Saudi Arabia and other present-day theocracies. Johann Hari, one of the (London) *Independent's* liveliest columnists, wrote an article whose title speaks for itself: 'The best way to undermine the jihadists is to trigger a rebellion of Muslim women.'¹³²

Or, switching to Christianity, I could have cited those American 'rapture' Christians whose powerful influence on American Middle Eastern policy is governed by their biblical belief that Israel has a God-given right to all the lands of Palestine.¹³³ Some rapture Christians go further and actually yearn for nuclear war because they interpret it as the 'Armageddon' which, according to their bizarre but disturbingly popular interpretation of the book of Revelation, will hasten the Second Coming. I cannot improve on Sam Harris's chilling comment, in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*:

It is, therefore, not an exaggeration to say that if the city of New York were suddenly replaced by a ball of fire, some significant percentage of the American population would see a silver-lining in the subsequent mushroom cloud, as it would suggest to them that the best thing that is ever going to happen was about to happen: the return of Christ. It should be blindingly obvious that beliefs of this sort will do little to help us create a durable future for ourselves - socially, economically, environmentally, or geopolitically. Imagine the consequences if any significant component of the U.S. government actually believed that the world was about to end and that its ending would be *glorious*. The fact that nearly half of the American population apparently believes this, purely on the basis of religious dogma, should be considered a moral and intellectual emergency.

There are, then, people whose religious faith takes them right outside the enlightened consensus of my 'moral *Zeitgeist*'. They represent what I have called the dark side of religious absolutism, and they are often called extremists. But my point in this section is that even mild and moderate religion helps to provide the climate of faith in which extremism naturally flourishes.

In July 2005, London was the victim of a concerted suicide bomb attack: three bombs in the subway and one in a bus. Not as bad as the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, and certainly not as unexpected (indeed, London had been braced for just such an event ever since Blair volunteered us as unwilling side-kicks in Bush's invasion of Iraq), nevertheless the London explosions horrified Britain. The newspapers were filled with agonized appraisals of what drove four young men to blow themselves up and take a lot of innocent people with them. The murderers were British citizens, cricket-loving, well-mannered, just the sort of young men whose company one might have enjoyed.

Why did these cricket-loving young men do it? Unlike their Palestinian counterparts, or their kamikaze counterparts in Japan, or their Tamil Tiger counterparts in Sri Lanka, these human bombs had no expectation that their bereaved families would be lionized, looked after or supported on martyrs' pensions. On the contrary, their relatives in some cases had to go into hiding. One of the men wantonly widowed his pregnant wife and orphaned his toddler. The action of these four young men has been nothing short of a disaster not just for themselves and their victims, but for their families and for the whole Muslim community in Britain, which now faces a backlash. Only religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people. Once again, Sam Harris put the point with percipient bluntness, taking the example of the Al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden (who had nothing to do with the London bombings, by the way). Why would anyone want to destroy the World Trade Center and everybody in it? To call bin Laden 'evil' is to evade our responsibility to give a proper answer to such an important question.

The answer to this question is obvious - if only because it has been patiently articulated ad nauseam by bin Laden

himself. The answer is that men like bin Laden *actually* believe what they say they believe. They believe in the literal truth of the Koran. Why did nineteen well-educated middle-class men trade their lives in this world for the privilege of killing thousands of our neighbors? Because they believed that they would go straight to paradise for doing so. It is rare to find the behavior of humans so fully and satisfactorily explained. Why have we been so reluctant to accept this explanation?¹³⁴

The respected journalist Muriel Gray, writing in the (Glasgow) *Herald* on 24 July 2005, made a similar point, in this case with reference to the London bombings.

Everyone is being blamed, from the obvious villainous duo of George W Bush and Tony Blair, to the inaction of Muslim 'communities'. But it has never been clearer that there is only one place to lay the blame and it has ever been thus. The cause of all this misery, mayhem, violence, terror and ignorance is of course religion itself, and if it seems ludicrous to have to state such an obvious reality, the fact is that the government and the media are doing a pretty good job of pretending that it isn't so.

Our Western politicians avoid mentioning the R word (religion), and instead characterize their battle as a war against 'terror', as though terror were a kind of spirit or force, with a will and a mind of its own. Or they characterize terrorists as motivated by pure 'evil'. But they are not motivated by evil. However misguided we may think them, they are motivated, like the Christian murderers of abortion doctors, by what they perceive to be righteousness, faithfully pursuing what their religion tells them. They are not psychotic; they are religious idealists who, by their own lights, are rational. They perceive their acts to be good, not because of some warped personal idiosyncrasy, and not because they have been possessed by Satan, but because they have been brought up, from the cradle, to have total and unquestioning *faith*. Sam Harris quotes a failed Palestinian suicide bomber who said that what drove him to kill

Israelis was 'the love of martyrdom ... I didn't want revenge for anything. I just wanted to be a martyr.' On 19 November 2001 *The New Yorker* carried an interview by Nasra Hassan of another failed suicide bomber, a polite young Palestinian aged twenty-seven known as 'S'. It is so poetically eloquent of the lure of paradise, as preached by moderate religious leaders and teachers, that I think it is worth giving at some length:

'What is the attraction of martyrdom?' I asked.

'The power of the spirit pulls us upward, while the power of material things pulls us downward,' he said. 'Someone bent on martyrdom becomes immune to the material pull. Our planner asked, "What if the operation fails?" We told him, "In any case, we get to meet the Prophet and his companions, inshallah."

'We were floating, swimming, in the feeling that we were about to enter eternity. We had no doubts. We made an oath on the Koran, in the presence of Allah - a pledge not to waver. This jihad pledge is called *bayt al-ridwan*, after the garden in Paradise that is reserved for the prophets and the martyrs. I know that there are other ways to do jihad. But this one is sweet - the sweetest. All martyrdom operations, if done for Allah's sake, hurt less than a gnat's bite!'

S showed me a video that documented the final planning for the operation. In the grainy footage, I saw him and two other young men engaging in a ritualistic dialogue of questions and answers about the glory of martyrdom . . .

The young men and the planner then knelt and placed their right hands on the Koran. The planner said: 'Are you ready? Tomorrow, you will be in Paradise.'¹³⁵

If I had been 'S', I'd have been tempted to say to the planner, 'Well, in that case, why don't you put *your* neck where your mouth is? Why don't *you* do the suicide mission and take the fast track to Paradise?' But what is so hard for us to understand is that - to repeat the point because it is so important - *these people actually*

believe what they say they believe. The take-home message is that we should blame religion itself, not religious *extremism* - as though that were some kind of terrible perversion of real, decent religion. Voltaire got it right long ago: 'Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.' So did Bertrand Russell: 'Many people would sooner die than think. In fact they do.'

As long as we accept the principle that religious faith must be respected simply because it is religious faith, it is hard to withhold respect from the faith of Osama bin Laden and the suicide bombers. The alternative, one so transparent that it should need no urging, is to abandon the principle of automatic respect for religious faith. This is one reason why I do everything in my power to warn people against faith itself, not just against so-called 'extremist' faith. The teachings of 'moderate' religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism.

It might be said that there is nothing special about religious faith here. Patriotic love of country or ethnic group can also make the world safe for its own version of extremism, can't it? Yes it can, as with the kamikazes in Japan and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. But religious faith is an especially potent silencer of rational calculation, which usually seems to trump all others. This is mostly, I suspect, because of the easy and beguiling promise that death is not the end, and that a martyr's heaven is especially glorious. But it is also partly because it discourages questioning, by its very nature.

Christianity, just as much as Islam, teaches children that unquestioned faith is a virtue. You don't have to make the case for what you believe. If somebody announces that it is part of his *faith*, the rest of society, whether of the same faith, or another, or of none, is obliged, by ingrained custom, to 'respect' it without question; respect it until the day it manifests itself in a horrible massacre like the destruction of the World Trade Center, or the London or Madrid bombings. Then there is a great chorus of disownings, as clerics and 'community leaders' (who elected *them*, by the way?) line up to explain that this extremism is a perversion of the 'true' faith. But how can there be a perversion of faith, if faith, lacking objective justification, doesn't have any demonstrable standard to pervert?

Ten years ago, Ibn Warraq, in his excellent book *Why I Am Not a Muslim*, made a similar point from the standpoint of a deeply knowledgeable scholar of Islam. Indeed, a good alternative title for Warraq's book might have been *The Myth of Moderate Islam*, which is the actual title of a more recent article in the (London) *Spectator* (30 July 2005) by another scholar, Patrick Sookhdeo, director of the Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity. 'By far the majority of Muslims today live their lives without recourse to violence, for the Koran is like a pick-and-mix selection. If you want peace, you can find peaceable verses. If you want war, you can find bellicose verses.'

Sookhdeo goes on to explain how Islamic scholars, in order to cope with the many contradictions that they found in the Qur'an, developed the principle of abrogation, whereby later texts trump earlier ones. Unfortunately, the peaceable passages in the Qur'an are mostly early, dating from Muhammad's time in Mecca. The more belligerent verses tend to date from later, after his flight to Medina. The result is that

the mantra 'Islam is peace' is almost 1,400 years out of date. It was only for about 13 years that Islam was peace and nothing but peace . . . For today's radical Muslims - just as for the mediaeval jurists who developed classical Islam - it would be truer to say 'Islam is war'. One of the most radical Islamic groups in Britain, al-Ghurabaa, stated in the wake of the two London bombings, 'Any Muslim that denies that terror is a part of Islam is kafir.' A kafir is an unbeliever (i.e. a non-Muslim), a term of gross insult. . .

Could it be that the young men who committed suicide were neither on the fringes of Muslim society in Britain, nor following an eccentric and extremist interpretation of their faith, but rather that they came from the very core of the Muslim community and were motivated by a mainstream interpretation of Islam?

More generally (and this applies to Christianity no less than to Islam), what is really pernicious is the practice of teaching children

that faith itself is a virtue. Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument. Teaching children that unquestioned faith is a virtue primes them - given certain other ingredients that are not hard to come by - to grow up into potentially lethal weapons for future jihads or crusades. Immunized against fear by the promise of a martyr's paradise, the authentic faith-head deserves a high place in the history of armaments, alongside the longbow, the warhorse, the tank and the cluster bomb. If children were taught to question and think through their beliefs, instead of being taught the superior virtue of faith without question, it is a good bet that there would be no suicide bombers. Suicide bombers do what they do because they really believe what they were taught in their religious schools: that duty to God exceeds all other priorities, and that martyrdom in his service will be rewarded in the gardens of Paradise. And they were taught *that* lesson not necessarily by extremist fanatics but by decent, gentle, mainstream religious instructors, who lined them up in their madrasas, sitting in rows, rhythmically nodding their innocent little heads up and down while they learned every word of the holy book like demented parrots. Faith can be very very dangerous, and deliberately to implant it into the vulnerable mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong. It is to childhood itself, and the violation of childhood by religion, that we turn in the next chapter.