

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Judgment Day, Part I.....	21
The Spiritual Athlete	49
The Tao of God.....	68
Paved With Good Intentions.....	89
Gangster's Paradise	115
The Invention of Reason	131
The Western Question.....	159
The Eastern Answer	180
The Peter Problem.....	206
Our Naughty Neighbors.....	229
Judgment Day, Part Deux.....	253

Introduction

Religion perplexes us precisely because it is so religious. We are surrounded by the churches, some of them beautiful cathedrals, that seem so familiar, so meant to be there, as if someone had gone around plopping them down in ways attractive to the human eye. But a nagging discomfort that has been plaguing us for perhaps the whole of our lives corresponds with all this beauty. The sheer number of churches means that there are a variety of denominations one can subscribe to. That means that there is a multitude of ways of getting into the wrong religious life. After all, the Catholics are pointing their fingers at the Protestants telling them they are completely wrong, and you have the Evangelicals telling you it is enough just to be saved by Jesus, so who are we to listen to when it comes to negotiating the maze of saving our souls? We will be very concerned about getting it wrong. The fear of getting it wrong can consume us. It can make us afraid. It can make us afraid of ending up in hell.

There are a variety of ways of staying out of hell. One way is to abolish the religious universe altogether and convince oneself that the whole project of heaven and hell is just a fable created because we fear death. We seem to have this vexing problem of religion because we die. Just imagine if we were a race of immortal beings. Then, the whole question of whether or not to believe in God would be something of a past time. We could spin theories about what role a god would play in the life of an immortal being as if we were watching a baseball game and speculating about the outcome on the basis of the pitcher's prowess.

Another way of staying out of hell is to become active in seeking out the one true path back to the God we left behind when we ended up in a hospital birthing room. The only problem with this method is *compulsiveness*. Diligently seeking out the Truth will

have us running around in a way that makes us vulnerable to all kinds of pitfalls. Often, we simply adopt the faith of our family because it is the most familiar. But if we strike out on our own in order to research the issue for ourselves, we will have to concern ourselves with getting it wrong. In fact, everyone you meet will tell you that you have it wrong until you begin to agree with his or her approach. The mania to convert your neighbor becomes so all consuming that people devote their whole lives to it. It's like a game. The more baptisms you rack up means that you are winning the soul saving dance by dunking as many people as you can in a tub of water as if you were doing a rather wet form of the mambo.

With everyone trying to convince us that their approach to God is not only the best one but also the "right" one, learning to tell the difference between the competing religions can end in a blur. One of the reasons that people are so intent on coercing agreement has to do with the fear that they are abandoning us to a horrible fate. At the end of the world and the believing Christians are raptured, those "left behind" have to cope with a world intent on torturing them. Beyond this period of punishment, all will be revealed and the correctness of their view will be available to absolutely everyone. We will all stand before the judgment bar of God and risk falling into the abyss if we have indeed gotten it all wrong. This is one worldview that the Christians have. The people, who reject this narrow selection of the saved, will have to prove that their point of view offers the advantages of a more universal cast. There are some, for instance, who believe that simply living a good life is good enough to avoid the flames tickling the feet of the damned. One such person was a philosopher by the name of Pascal whose argument became famously known as Pascal's Wager.

Pascal wanted to help us with this notion of just how to live. He suggested we live as if God exists whether he does or not. Then, we have covered our bases. If it turns out that God doesn't exist, then we have lost nothing because we have lived a good and happy life and if he does exist, we have successfully escaped hell. But unfortunately, Pascal sidestepped the issue of whether or not we have succeeded in living an authentic life. In other words, it may be important to come down on a side of God's existence, to really find out the verity of the question, in order to live a more precise meaning of life and follow that religiously, whether that life is a religious one or not. But *proving* God's existence is virtually impossible, an issue we will return to in chapter three. So all we really have to go on is *conviction*. How do we go about getting that?

We debate certain issues because we believe passionately in the position we hold. We don't feel we have to be empirically right on where we stand (except of course to treat the facts and evidence with proper objectivity) but only the need to convince the person we are arguing with the force of our stance on the issue. The difference between this and conversion is that the person we face is not an object to be subsumed, but a fellow human being we hope will agree with us on the strength of our persuasive abilities. We start out neutral on the question of their acceptance of our arguments because it may very well be that they convince us to agree with them. The back and forth of a satisfying debate, assuming it doesn't inflame the passions too much, will lead to a peculiar Samadhi where all the people in the debate will feel vindicated by the sheer effort of presenting their case. We may find that the truth we seek in the debate we are having may not reside in either of our positions but comes out somewhere in between. The dialectical method employed in this particular kind of conversation will either soften or

harden the sensibility toward the kind of conviction we have on the topic, even if this topic is the rather large one of God. Through repeated conversations with people who have a sanguine influence on our mental state, it is possible to reach a larger conclusion on the nature of our convictions on these topics. It is like polishing a stone. Repeated trials will round off the corners and nurture the shine into a thing of beauty.

Of course, the debate need not happen in the presence of other people. Studying a topic on our own can strengthen the emotional contents of our positions. When the topic turns to religious matters, we may feel the stakes a little keenly. It may be difficult to avoid entanglements between all that we have learned about God and the synthesis we would like to have, that particular sense of Samadhi, while mulling over the matter in the confinement of the brain. There will be people like the existentialists who believe that these confines are all we have. Their concern for authenticity is based on the ability of the individual to work their life's task on their own. Kierkegaard, for instance, believed that the whole project of religion is between God and us, period. But at the heart of the moment between conceiving of the ultimate and our finite experience lays the meaning of the paradoxes that face us when thought confronts itself in the visage of God. The Christians are faced with the problematic theory that Jesus was both God and man, somehow took on the sins of the world, and was resurrected after spending three days apart from his body. Kierkegaard admits that this whole project of Christianity is absurd and it is because it is absurd that we must take the leap of faith and believe it anyway. What he's saying is, the story of Jesus is so unlikely and yet so forceful that the only option is to move past the possibility of being offended by him and become a "knight of faith," which means Christians will be misunderstood for what they believe because their

road is ultimately a lonely one. C.S. Lewis proffered the argument that Jesus is either God or a fraud and there is no other way of reading the story. Many Christians feel that the story of Jesus depends on this idea that he himself was just what he claimed himself to be or else the whole story suffers from a fatal flaw. The “leap” that needs to be taken holds hands with holiness or the believer will fall into an ugly ditch.

Some Christians will believe in a principle that used to be called sacerdotalism. This meant that in order for someone to have a successful religious experience there needed to be a mediator like a pastor or a priest. The reasoning is that we will be less likely to get it wrong if we have people telling us that we have gotten it right. We can depend on their superior experience and learning as a mantle of authority to lean on when discovering the meaning of religion for ourselves. This need to have a community, to *gather* seems deep rooted in the psyche. This way we can sidestep the issue of getting it wrong by blaming an unsuccessful religious life on someone else’s leadership skills. But this seems to offer very little protection before God since individual responsibility plays a part in saving the Christian’s soul. However, individual responsibility has become something of a modern problem.

Ever since Luther nailed up his 95 theses to the rectory door, a crisis of authority afflicted the religious world. People began to suffer anxiety on the issue of just what constituted an authentic religious life. Who were they supposed to believe when the “universal” church fractured into smaller pieces? And the growing body of scientific data, the change from a religious world to a scientific one, gave religionists an uneasy alliance with their social world. Suddenly, relying on the routine terms of salvation seemed increasingly schizophrenic. How to cope with multiple reference points became

a preoccupation with those who still refused to buckle under the pressure to simply opt out of the religious venue by pursuing epicurean lifestyles in a more sedate environment bereft of soteriological concerns. Christians felt besieged by a New Testament view of judgment that portrayed God as a loving but fierce dispenser of justice. This was part of the schizophrenia. Jesus talked of loving one's neighbor and turning the other cheek, but the Book of Revelations presented a scary God who deployed horsemen in advance of an apocalypse. It even had a scary bad guy bearing the number of a beast, roundly thought to be the Anti-Christ, a misleading but charismatic man who would enslave the world under the guise of saving souls. Fire and brimstone became one approach a preacher could take, positioning sinners to feel the full weight of their wronging God just as the message of love and compassion would seem to drop out of the lexicon. It leads us to ask the question, how good at being Christians are today's Christians?

Jesus seemed to be preaching a gospel of the nurturing mother variety. He used the symbol of the shepherd meekly calling after his lost sheep to re-enter the fold. The Golden Rule suggested that one treat everyone, even one's enemies, just as you would want to be treated yourself. But the impossibility of practicing this "gentler" side of Jesus in this modern world of terrorists and threatening tin pan dictators has rendered the Sermon on the Mount rather minor in the canon of practical Christian literature. How can one love a suicide bomber whose only goal is to inflict as much damage as possible within as small a geographical area as possible? It seems that Christians have leaned more heavily on a strict-father model, where sparing the rod is less likely given the present social realities. It is unfortunate that a certain amount of hate has crept into modern Christian thinking. One thinks of the killing of a doctor who suffered the

unfortunate plight of performing “legal” abortions. Whether or not one wants to characterize this as a form of civil disobedience, I doubt Christ had a sniper scope in mind when he suggested we train our thoughts on helping those who cannot help themselves (the unborn). Christians are very keen that these days are the “end times” and Jesus’ return to the earth in order to destroy the unbelievers that we are supposed to love will actually happen in a real reality (no really).

But punishment seems to be part of Jesus’ story as well. In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Christians are very careful to point out that there is quite a divide between the hell where the rich man languishes and the heaven where Lazarus is looking down from. We will discuss more of the features of Jesus’ personality in chapter two, but suffice it to say that Jesus was kind of a firebrand as suggested by his actions in the temple, the time when he grew angered by the presence of money-changers there. The Christian story has been replete with a two-tiered story of persecution. When the religion was new, the Romans persecuted the Christians by martyring them. But when Christianity gained the imprimatur of the authorities, it purged itself by persecuting those who were labeled dissenters. The two faces of Christianity seem supported in texts they interpreted from the time of Christ, either to bend belief in the direction of love or to punish in the apocalyptic vision that plagued it from its humble beginnings. Christ became an asymptote. The closer they got to their expectation of his return, the farther away the event seemed to move. Christian leaders had to fill in the empty space in between with a litany of actions that are easily impugned from our modern position.

But waiting for the apocalypse has been a part of Christian thinking since its inception. One of the culminating events came when Miller predicted Christ’s return in

1843, and when the year came and went without the return, the period became known as the Great Disappointment. Nowadays, Christians like to speculate with similar ferocity. They use terms like “signs of the times” to prove that the universe is providing predictors to the event that will *finally* come. With the advantage of time, prophecies are unfolding in ways that ineluctably point to the imminence of Christ’s return. But time is a funny thing in the Christian consciousness. They will be happy to tell you that evolution requires great spans of time, and, since the world is only six thousand years old, evolution couldn’t possibly be real. Their unhappiness with the concept of evolution has led to a competing view called intelligent design. It was tested in a Delaware courtroom and found to lack the same precepts that would allow it to be called scientific. The old uneasy relationship with science still bothers Christians who want to see their faith validated with something that can compete with the scientific worldview in a very visible way.

This is a recent paradox. Faith is a belief in things unseen, but Christians seem to want this principle to be vindicated in an evidentiary showing. One of the problems with God is his invisibility. This leads to a great deal of anthropomorphizing. The number of people who believe that God looks like their white-headed grandfather would fill a phonebook. This language of God as a man began in the Old Testament that was used as a metaphor for the *relationship* God develops with his people. In other words, the humanity of God was found in his ability to relate and not in his actual form. Building models of God seems like a particularly human event because we need to base our prayers on something we are praying to, not just some amorphous presence who may or may not care about our individual struggles. Perhaps this is where the language of having

a “personal Jesus” came from. We can imagine ourselves having a relationship with someone who actually existed, transcended the human realm, but still seems tied to it somehow. A lot of the strands attaching God to the human world seem loose and tenuous, so we try to make them concrete in the way that seems the most effective to us. We are constantly trying to make sense of things as if our brains were reason machines latching onto reasons that have the power to explain whatever gap we have in our thinking. Whether or not God is truly available for communication is an interesting question that we really don’t have the power to answer.

At least on the question of hell, we can assuage our consciences that fear is the motivator that a lot of pastors use to hold us closer to their emptying pews. The fact that something so awful needs to exist in the religious universe is disproved by the scant biblical evidence for the place than there are boosters of the idea who use it purely as a means of social control. Gehenna, the Greek word for hell in the New Testament simply referred to a garbage heap and not a place of eternal suffering. Somehow, over the years, the term came to represent the most extreme form of punishment possible for sinners, which makes it kind of hard to escape since the Bible admits that we are all sinners. Repentance is the great do-over that helps us stay out, but then again so is reincarnation, which gives us a new life in which to make better decisions and improve our karma. We will be getting to this idea in chapter nine.

Speaking of reincarnation, the Buddhist side of the religious universe has a much different story to tell. The Buddha was born a prince in India who was kept within the palace walls so he wouldn’t be exposed to the realities of the external world. But on a series of trips outside of the palace, he was exposed to infirmity, old age, and death, three

things he never knew existed. They impacted him so much that he eventually escaped the palace and went on a journey to find the meaning of life. His solution was eventually called the Middle Way because he first experienced hedonism, then asceticism, and finally the release of enlightenment, a compromise between the two other extremes. Buddhism is the opposite of Christianity because it deals with a whole host of different problems.

For one thing, Buddhism does not have a concept of a creator god. Westerners often shake their heads at this strange eastern religion that does not *worship*. Instead, Buddhists are looking for a release from the suffering of the world. There are some original precepts called the Four Noble truths. They are that life contains suffering, the causes to the suffering come from “grasping” onto material things, the cessation from suffering is possible, and there is a path to eliminating suffering called the eightfold path. I won’t spell each of the steps of this path but Buddhism is a very cerebral religion that uses meditation to stop the attachment to the external world. Christians think the main problem with people is their immersion in sin and one needs to be saved from an inveterate nature by only one person, Jesus. Gaining this salvation involves a great deal of pomp and circumstance in the religious rituals (in Catholicism) or rejecting all the wrong kinds of people (everyone else). Buddhists just want to be one with the universe (an odd but fairly accurate way of putting it). Their method of salvation is the release from suffering, not by praying to a god, but by thinking. Gautama Buddha just happened to be the first person to discover this spiritual technology. Once he placed himself under the Bodhi tree and began contemplating existence, he began to discover that the nature of reality is that it has no nature. This concept gets explicated in the doctrine of no self,

nondoining, and emptiness. Christians don't have any idea what these ideas are doing in a religion when the point for them comes down to surviving death, not transcending it.

Buddhism and Christianity then become somewhat incommensurable.

Incommensurability means that two communities, in this case Christianity and Buddhism, are unable to communicate with each other because they cannot appreciate the validity of the other's position. It may just be that they are both careening to the same conclusion, that a happy life is achieved by love and compassion, but their disagreement on the methods for getting there are so profound that they will only end up shaking their heads at the end of an unsatisfying dialogue. Many westerners are attracted to Buddhism and situate themselves in the eastern frame of mind in order to understand something so usually alien to their western consciousness. But as will be discussed in the course of this book, many of the kinds of questions that westerners are asking about the large questions of the existence of God and how to live a moral life find their answers in the easterner's peculiarities. This seems to be so because the point of commensurability, the point of actual contact where the two religions *can* understand each other seems to rest on the shoulders of the religion's founders that extol knowledge Huxley labeled the "perennial philosophy."

Huxley discovered (as did Jung) that there are underlying similarities between all the great teachings. These similarities seem to share a space in a "collective unconscious" (to use Jung's term). Spirituality seems to be a universal phase in the currents of human existence. This has led to some silly speculation as to whether there is a god gene or whether the fact that just because beliefs have natural antecedents disproves them completely. But we will examine some of the atheist contributions to the

story in chapter ten. Religion might be considered the architecture of spirituality, a fact that has some rejecting the label religion on the grounds that it doesn't fairly depict their commitment to their spirituality. Organizations have a curious smothering by-product, as if they were overprotective mothers that squelched creativity in otherwise intelligent creatures. But being in the organization, as we have discussed, also has the advantage of coming up with clever ways of keeping us out of hell. We seem to have a primordial predisposition to fear that God may actually abandon us to horrible fates if we disregard him. In Goethe's *Faust*, for instance, Dr. Faust manages to escape the devil's clutches despite the fact that he had sold his soul to him already. Breaking the so-called Faustian Bargain is the preoccupation of the rebels who know they have turned their backs on their faith and want salvation anyway. They may have to settle for purgatory.

Proofs for God's existence may be contained in the very foundation of our knowledge of the world. Some have suggested that the amount of evil in the world is proof enough that God doesn't exist. The reasoning goes like this. If there were a child stricken with cancer and it is admitted that this is an unmitigated evil, then the fact that God doesn't interfere and cure the child means that God is not all powerful and since God must be all powerful in order to exist, God does not exist. This is an old philosophical chestnut known in the annals as the problem of evil. If we add another wrinkle and say that evil is a feature of this world that must exist in order for there to be good also, then we follow Leibniz in calling this the best of all possible worlds. Leibniz was writing long before Hitler amazed the world with an earth shattering evil called the concentration camp. It made the Quakers question the viability of pursuing pacifism as an absolute since some people evidently need to be stopped. The problem of evil remains a problem

to this day. We may just have to conclude that God knows what he's doing and that, in the end, we will understand the reasons (there's that word again) for all the events that defied explanation. But part of our satisfaction with the answer will depend on just what kind of thing (person?) God turns out to be.

The question of the evidence for the existence of God gets complicated even if we accept the anecdotal evidence, or reports, we get from other people's experiences with the divine. For instance, we have the Catholics who seem to churn out people who have seen the Virgin Mary. This would seem to sway the balance of power to the Catholics as the one true religion. But then, the Mormons' first prophet, Joseph Smith, claimed to have seen God the father and his son Jesus Christ who reportedly told him to reject all existing religious claims, so would this mean that Mormonism is the one true faith? Let's throw in the Dalai Lama who, at the age of four, was able to identify the possessions of the former lama as if he had indeed been that person in a former life. Does this mean that Buddhism is the one true religion? You see the problem. There are competing claims to addressing the question of just what religious architecture to ally with. But what if God were the kind of person that liked to throw a little evidence to the Catholics, a little to the Mormons, and a little to the Buddhists. This will throw off the seeker who will wonder if someone is lying or maybe God likes to play a different sort of game than we had previously imagined. Einstein famously said that "God does not play dice with the universe" but what if Einstein was wrong, as he seems to be just a little bit with recent discoveries in quantum mechanics. What if God delights in people being confused and casting about for glimmers of Him as if their lives depended on it. Maybe, just maybe, our lives don't depend on it. God may just be the kind of person who enjoys watching

the seriousness of his creatures continually transform into higher and higher forms of hysteria. At some point, it is hysterical, hysterically funny. The opposite of being serious is being funny and the two seem to blend into one another, especially if someone were taking himself too seriously. Nowhere does it say that God enjoys a good joke. We know that Jesus wept, but did he laugh? To understand the type of God who would delight in the suffering of others requires that we revisit the problem of evil.

The reasoning goes something like this. In order for God to intend that we don't take life too seriously, he must be somewhat neutral on the question of religious reality. He may want us to discover that the only thing that stops us from grasping God's intentions is our unwillingness to conceptualize God as such a neutral person. What we have to discover is not the nature of God but how to live a meaningful life that is not encumbered by religious concerns. Now we have a problem. Does God's neutrality mean that he is indifferent to the suffering of his children? The answer lies in the idea that suffering isn't real. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a man named Arjuna is about to go to war, but is concerned that his own relatives may be among the people he has to put to the sword. He raises this question with a God by the name of Krishna who proceeds to tell him that death is only a crossing over, an unreal event that does not imperil the person's personality at all. Arjuna is persuaded. By the same token, maybe Krishna is right and this life is but a blip on an eternal timeline that makes death seem like an evil, but is really just a moment between the bookends of birth and death. If God believes that suffering is unreal and that it is ultimately a temporary state easily cured by the transformation accompanying death, then its importance only lies in the significance human beings assign to it. It only exists because we live in a world governed by physics,

which means we are at the mercy of natural laws we cannot escape except in the transcendence of mundane existence (too Buddhist?). But how closely does God watch the action if he is indeed a neutral person, perhaps even on the question of his own existence? Certainly he knows that he exists, but what he doesn't concern himself with is our knowing that he exists. To him this is a problem of neutrality. But if God wants us to understand his desire for us not to concern ourselves with his existence, we have a problem of free will.

If God chooses for us to have free will, then we really don't have it, since God is, in some sense, forcing us to choose. We must have enough independence from God's will to have *actual* freedom. Our interest in God's projects should have a direct connection, however. Some have suggested that God is in great sympathy with humanity's plight. This means that he grieves when we grieve and that he experiences joy when we do. It is part of God's perfection that he grows. I am suggesting that God does grow, that he is a dynamic entity, but that he is more neutral on the subject of our sufferings than the theologians who support the previous view. Now does this mean that he doesn't care what we do to each other? On this question perhaps he is forced into neutrality. In other words, there are certain things which he cannot do. This view suggests that there are constraints on God, that, however much he wants to care about what we do to each other, we are sufficiently distant from his influence that our independence guarantees a non-interference policy from God. This is part of the problem with human suffering. He could have created beings that could choose badly but nevertheless always choose to act well. Unfortunately for those who suffer, we are beings created to choose either to do bad or good acts. But for our cancerous child,

which is a situation called a natural evil as opposed to a moral evil (something that people do as opposed to something that is a so-called act of God), the non-interference policy means that there are certain features of this world, certain things allowed to exist, that need to be there in order to have a morally beneficent world. It isn't the best of all possible worlds, but it is a world where evil exists because God is a neutral person on the question of suffering and we are free to choose how to act since God is prevented from interfering. This also requires a certain amount of skepticism. We cannot know if God is good, so to speak, because he doesn't require us to know this. What we can know is that life is indeed an illusion and we will come to know God on the incidence of our death. Meanwhile, we are left to our own devices while we sojourn on the earth.

The important thing to remember about God is that, since he is a neutral person, he doesn't concern himself with the grand project of religious piety. It is something man-made, something Christopher Hitchens goes to great pains to tell us. Our contact with the divine isn't invalidated by this argument; it just requires a fresh look since God delights in the struggle to understand him. I suppose you could call this a game argument. Life's surreal quality means that we are involved in a celestial game where the winner gets satisfaction over the God with whom he plays. In what follows, I will show that not only need we not be worried about being cast into hell, but the exploration of the religious universe can actually be akin to appreciating an inside joke. Let's collect our game pieces and proceed.

Judgment Day, Part I

Justice and revenge take opposite sides of the same principle. The point is to make things come out fair, regardless of the harm initiating the need for starting the principle in action. Justice is supposed to be different than revenge since justice is supposed to take into account all the factors that happened in the event, and then balance the consequences out so that all sides will agree that the correct action has taken place. Revenge takes this notion down a different path. Once the harm has happened, the scales have to be balanced by force, by *making* the party harmed *feel* better through immediate action. Justice is supposed to be dispassionate while revenge is all about emotion and how to deploy it strategically, in order to get one's way. We might say that revenge is selfish. Justice is supposed to satisfy some abstract logical principle created by laws we consent to by making ourselves subject to these laws. So is justice the opposite of selfishness?

The truth of the matter is, it may be hard to distinguish between a wise dispensation of justice and a promise of revenge. After all, the people seeking justice are usually doing so because someone has harmed them, and their initial impulse is to get back at the people who have harmed them. Taking the law into one's own hands makes the application of justice harder to accomplish, because there is no one adjudicating the beef. We all hear the platitude, "I just want to get justice" for the lost loved one when the hope of the speaker is that the perpetrator will not only get what's deserved but also be punished in a way that is satisfying for the victims of the criminal's crime. In other words, the distinction between a dispassionate application of justice and an emotional display of revenge can become muddled by the thin line that separates them. Usually, the

difference merely lies in where the action happens. If the remediation takes place in a courtroom, we are more apt to apply a label of justice to the situation. But if the remedy takes place at the hands of a mob or a person acting outside the law, we label that revenge. But revenge is a natural human reaction. How many of us spend our lives making people pay for the way we were treated as children as if the entire human race had a hand in wronging us?

Jesus seemed unusually sensitive to the problem between justice and revenge. Sometimes, his line of attack was to get the people involved to examine themselves for blamelessness before they condemned someone else. He knew that no one acts with a clean conscience, so ultimately, nobody can be punished. Instead, he adjured us to forgive. He believed in forgiveness so much that he risked much by extending it to people without thought to the consequences to himself. Only God can forgive certain crimes, so Jesus angered many by seeming to act in the place of God. He may actually have been concerned that these perpetrators experience justice before some of the misguided subject them to revenge. After all, if the ultimate arbiter is God, then acting humanely to those who have wronged us is the only way to ensure that the possibility of justice exists.

This seems to be the argument for those who believe in the principle of natural law. God created the principles upon which the laws of man reside. Only by appeal to a divinely inspired morality can we get anything that resembles a rule of law. The only problem for those who advocate natural law is its propensity to offend those who want a more secular view into the beginning of things. Laws, say the secularists, is less about divine morality than it is about the application of particularly efficacious rules that people

have learned, through time, to deploy in ways that benefit society as a whole, so there is no need to refer to a God whose existence we can't prove and also, whose counsel we cannot rely on since no one has seen or heard from him lately. For some, stepping outside the bounds of the religious universe is a sure way to invoke chaos. And for others, invoking God for the resolution of legal disputes remains difficult because we can't call him to testify.

The cause of the God-fearing will always be complicated by the invisibility of God. Yes, say the believers, but God exists, only where will be the rejoinder of the unbelievers. Perhaps efforts like defining legality and illegality in terms of natural law is the same effort to put a remedy for a wrong in the right place. Efforts at a natural-scientific explanation for the existence of laws ends up being an existential realization that humanity is the beginning and ending of the known universe, so there is no use casting about for glimmers of God; he is not there. We have to rely on ourselves for the application of justice to have adequate enforcement in a society. But even the Christians will have a difficult time with the idea of justice. Their idea of God requires us to stand before him at some distant day when we will have to answer for our sins, a day known as judgment day.

The gist of judgment day stands on the principle that all of us will receive an individual assessment of our time on earth. If God gives us a passing grade, a trip through the pearly gates is assured. But if we fail, God pulls the lever marked hell and we are fated to spend eternity in a state of suffering. We are supposed to believe that God's judgment is so perfect that we can't help agreeing with his decision. Of course, we will say, but that is the perfect outcome for me. I have been careening for this destination

since I was old enough to make decisions. The idea that people actually choose to go to hell may sound surprising at first. But, so the story goes, Satan's rebellion resulted from a choice to revenge himself against God for not being the favorite. Ironically, Cain would murder his brother for the same reason. The whole Christian story reads like the workings of a very large dysfunctional family, where children earn their way into God's good graces by being good boys and girls. The bad are invariably doomed. There really is no rest for the wicked.

But judgment day itself comes at the end of a long process of ending the world. The book of the bible labeled the Book of Revelation begins with the pronouncement that the world will be a dark, forbidding place after Jesus gets through wreaking havoc on the evildoers. Nothing works simply for the Christian. In the end times, a beast will emerge from the ocean, become the Anti-Christ, and become the political force for what seems to be an initially good thing. People will be duped into following a person they think is good, but is actually recruiting Satan's army. Meanwhile, a beast emerges from the earth to influence the religious powers that be as a false prophet. Together, they tag team the earth into a place of constant turmoil. The only way out is to await Jesus' return. But here, at this point, a sort of pre-judging seems to take place because the Christians experience what they call the rapture. There really is no real scriptural support for this concept, but the apocalyptic tradition has seized on the idea that the faithful will be spared the horrors of the end times. These happy few are removed from the earth, where they meet Jesus in the clouds, happily hovering over the carnage going on below them. Here we have to be suspicious about that line between justice and revenge blurring. The Jews killed their lord and savior while he was mortal and now, at the end of time, the

Jews will be killed for supporting the Anti-Christ. A great battle at a place called Armageddon will see that the revenge is finally completed when the forces of Satan are defeated and Satan himself is bound in chains and thrown in a fiery pit for a period of a thousand years. At the end of this, another battle ensues when Satan is defeated once and for all. As we can see, the Christians vie for a rather ambiguous distinction as a complicated bunch since their prophecies always seem to require quite a bit of maneuvering to complete.

At first glance, the story seems simple enough. Jesus comes to the earth as a mortal, engages in spiritual warfare, and after much verbal battling, is put to death, not because he was guilty of anything, but because he had to save mankind. Wait a minute, we might object, what's so simple about that? The logic does seem to overwhelm a more straightforward reading. In that reading, the battle in heaven created a circumstance where God was forced to distrust everyone, send them into these mortal bodies to be tested as to their loyalty to him, and then return. The only hitch is, what does he do to the ones who fail the test? Well, actually, no one can pass the test on his own. We would all be doomed to hell if it weren't for the interference of some supernatural being who helps us to return by doing something very necessary. He manages to save us from ourselves. You see, we are fated to sin. No one cannot stop himself or herself from sinning, so the only course possible is to sign over your soul to Jesus, the redeemer of souls. Exactly how does Jesus perform this miraculous act? This is where things become very unclear. Evidently, he has to die in order to redeem us. What? Yes, the messiah comes into the world to die like a criminal so we can live in everlasting luxury. Yes, it does seem counter-intuitive. In order to succeed, it appears like he fails. But in this upside-down

logic, he wins a place for us in heaven by losing his life. Suddenly, God becomes less paranoid about his children if they have faith that his son did not die in vain, although, come to think of it, he doesn't really die since he gets resurrected three days later. You can see how complicated the Christians are. Jesus dies so that we might live with God eternally, only he doesn't really die, so just what is going on here? The only way to figure it out is to see it as a psychodrama that moves from the ethereal to the real in interesting ways. We, like Satan, fell from heaven (albeit in a different way), so there is an element of spiritual reality in the story. Once Jesus gets involved the spiritual is made physical, and natural laws throw everything off. Now we are doomed precisely because we are physical, and once Jesus becomes physical himself, he becomes subject to our laws. He moves back to the spiritual by becoming resurrected and thus becomes the caretaker of our souls precisely because he instantiates elements of both the physical and spiritual realms. Jesus somehow strides a gap between what it means to be human and what it means to be divine. Since he was the only person who died after living a sinless life, he transforms souls from a damned to a saved state if they just believe in him. I guess what the souls have to believe is that Christ died for them, that his sacrifice was not just his life, but also the inconvenience of having to crossover into the physical world. And all this seems guided by God's initial paranoia.

If God requires that we assuage his feelings of paranoia, then where does that leave us in regard to his indifference to our knowing that he exists? Well, remember that the foregoing summation is the official Christian story. Even though it isn't my purpose to debunk any specific religion in this book, we may have to reject certain features of some religious thinking in order to advance the cause of, well, irony. In order for there to

be a reading of God that differs from a specifically Christian perspective, we may have to admit that they have gotten some of it wrong. As one example, we have to ask the question, where do we find a place for love in all this talk about justice?

Part of the Christian story is that God does indeed love us. This is why the Christians are interested in plugging into God's plan for them personally as if it were possible to abdicate personal responsibility once one is confident one is following God. The unfortunate result, at least in the modern conception, is that this designer plan applies only to them. They find themselves right in the middle of a debate on solipsism although they may be unaware they are doing this. If everyone is engaging in implementing their own version of God's plan for them, then there is no way for them to verify that someone else is equally on the same road. We might suggest that the church serves the purpose of uniting these people so that they don't have to live in their own minds all the time when it comes to following God. But even this proviso does not remove the tendency toward isolation. They can never discover the status of someone else's religious reality. They are doomed to clinging to this designer plan without the benefit of some sort of verification process, since such a process just can't exist in a universe where God is a personal savior, one that only exists for those who try to divine their personalized plan.

Perhaps this set of circumstances explains why Christians seem to privilege justice over love in the application of their religious practices. It is more important to them, for instance, to deny gays the right to marry than it is to figure out how to bring peace to the world. In the recent election, there were no ballot initiatives trying to end warlike tendencies, only trying to end what they see as moral outrages. The solipsism of their world makes compassion more abstract than I think their leader, Jesus, would

actually approve of. Despite his going to great pains to inform his followers that one should love one's enemies, even going so far as to offer a parable of a Samaritan who saves a Jew, rumors about Barack Obama's religious predilections being in the Muslim direction was meant as a slander when it actually should be beside the point. The modern church has a great deal of difficulty performing the directions of their original master.

So the Christian program is riddled with flaws. This doesn't necessarily invalidate the whole religion, it just calls into question the wisdom of following a solipsistic practice of divining the mind of God. Since I contend that God doesn't care if we even know that he exists, it stands to reason that the option of discovering his mind, however impossible, does indeed remain the desideratum of the Christian. Perhaps a saner way of approaching the issue of discovering God's plan for us is to realize that he doesn't have one. If we are doomed to assuage his paranoia, we are only led to an inevitable dead end. Admitting he exists is not the same as wondering what he wants from us. Instead, we have to be prepared for the possibility that his indifference to our knowledge of him requires that we abandon the whole notion of a universe uniquely constructed for our personal benefit. It may not have escaped the notice of at least a few that the world is a fairly cruel place. Why would God make it crueler by requiring something that isn't fair at all? I think I have shown that following the Christian logic is itself a barrier to belief just by its counter-intuitive nature. I guess we have to ask the question at this point, then, what is its appeal?

We might be justified in saying that people only believe because it's the thing to do. In surveys, something like ninety percent of respondents say they believe in God. That doesn't mean they go to church, or take any one theology seriously, but they are

inured to the idea that there is some organizational structure in the universe that makes the presence of a God in it probable. There was an argument offered by one theologian that if one were to come across a watch in a desert, one would have to assume that the watch has a maker, it could not have grown there on its own. The idea that beauty, justice and love happened by chance just seems too ridiculous to take seriously on a common sense level. Part of the appeal of religions (in general) could be this universal problem of how we all got here. Christians in particular have developed a plan of salvation that says that there is a way to get back to God if one simply believes in Jesus. The cruelty of the world seems mitigated by the idea that there is a *reason* for it being cruel. Sometimes this is thought of as a test, again going back to the war in heaven, and sometimes this is thought of as the ultimate university for learning things only embodied beings can. The appeal then, can be thought of as defining the word inevitability. Just how seriously should we take this idea that a belief in God is in some way inevitable?

The issue of genetics makes the issue of inevitability interesting. Genetics governs our behaviors so completely that it seems like we are programmed, just like a computer, to respond to our environment in certain ways. Genetics is deterministic. If we have free will, it's because we have genetic predispositions that allow us to follow one path of programming over another. But it always seems like the science of genetics always has the last word. Our fate seems to be at the mercy of a despotic government. Some have even suggested that there is a god gene. This means that we have a genetic predisposition to believe in a god, a predisposition that seems to switch on more often than not. We can wonder abstractly if there ever was a civilization to which the word

god, or gods did not make sense. It seems almost impossible that such a civilization could ever have existed.

But this raises another issue. If the god gene is so universally applied, then how are we to go about disbelieving in God except we go through all kinds of intellectual arguments that take us down an atheistic path, a path that seems fated to be like salmon swimming upstream? It would make sense that God would program in all kinds of predispositions that would make it easier to believe in him if we are so deterministically led to do so. Taking this seriously means that the absence of such programming would raise serious doubts about the *necessity* of belief. If, as the Christians allege, believing in Jesus is so crucial to winning a place in heaven, then why is there not a Jesus gene? The god gene only ensures that we believe in *a* god, not necessarily the Christian one. After all, there are some cultures past and present that are prone to believing in more than one god. It would seem that if the information that the Christian story provides were really that crucial that it would be programmed into our genetic material. After all, isn't the question of where we end up for eternity be very crucial information? It would seem that the absence of such genetic material would militate against the information being all that crucial anyway. One objection might be that the gene for conversion could switch on, but, unfortunately, this is very far from determined. Otherwise, Christianity would become so strong a meme that it would be impossible to resist. That would remove the need for free will entirely. But is free will just a complicated batch of genetic switches that turn off and on according to environmental pressures? This seems more like a question for science than for philosophy, but the problem of determinism suggests that we have to solve the riddle of whether we actually make choices or we only seem to. We

can be like Jean Paul Sartre and suggest that human beings have absolute freedom, that even in the deepest, darkest dungeons of the earth, we still have the ability to choose how we will feel about it. We even seem to have evidence of this when Nelson Mandela walked out of his prison of twenty years not only not an embittered man, but a peacemaker who eventually took over the government of his country. He seems to have *chosen* a course that hindsight makes completely counter-intuitive. Or we can be like Einstein who believed that human action was completely determined by physical forces as if human beings were merely billiard balls on a table. Whatever side we come down on in the debate, we are faced with the problem of inevitability. Is it more or less likely that we will believe in God because of genetic programming?

People are bound to believe because there seems like no other way. It is equally unlikely that people are born atheists, because fighting the tide of so much evidence, however wishy-washy, requires a great deal of intellectual speculation. One might even say that I am a dupe of common sense too since I'm advocating the existence of a God, albeit a very different one from the general view. I guess I'm not willing to throw the baby out with the bath water. Religious ways of thinking may have gotten specific things wrong, but on the larger question, they may very well be right. But then we have the solipsism of the Christians to worry about.

I'm guessing the only way out of getting away from abstraction is to abstract even further. The idea that our God is a game-playing God, moving us around on a chessboard of possibilities, means that God has absented himself from our personal reality altogether. Well, one may ask, just what is his function if it isn't dispensing justice and getting us to guess what he's thinking?

My answer is, he just *happens* to be there. There's nothing we can do about his existence anymore than we can disprove our own existence. So the common sense view that we converse with each other because we actually exist, we're not just hoping that the other guy isn't a mental projection, can actually be shorn up with the idea of an accidental God. There's a God's eye view that perceives everything for us, so we don't have to worry about things being real or not. Of course, there is a long philosophical tradition that debates the question of reality, but let's settle the question by admitting that things are real because God exists, not because we have to infer things about other people that we will have very little success in figuring out. We will be getting to more about the existence of God in the chapter on the Tao of God. For now, we have to accept that there is no guarantee of justice in the world since the kind of God that does exist is not out to get us to prove our loyalty to him through some program of satisfying his paranoia. But we still have to wonder if the idea of a judgment day imperils our souls if we decide to become atheists and reject the notion of a God altogether. This will be a matter for the chapter on Our Naughty Neighbors. But damnation remains a focal point in the human mind because of a concept I call the problem of Primordial Fear.

In this idea, this universal impulse for a God runs deeper than anyone can imagine. People are scared that if they reject God, they do so at their own peril. The fear goes like this. If I leave the comfort of a belief in God, is it possible to leave God at all? The answer is yes if there is no God, but the answer is complicated by the atavistic recognition that there *may* be a God. Only if one is very good at convincing themselves that it is okay to go ahead and buck the trend thus becoming an atheist does one escape containment in the problem of Primordial Fear. Otherwise, the stakes seem rather high.

Of course, if we just follow Pascal's wager, which was explained in the introduction, then we can avoid angst by just going along with the popular view. But another option is to just realize that God's idea of justice does not include that we know him. I'm sure he doesn't mind the effort of people to try to get to know him even though they ultimately bang their heads against a wall. But because our God is a scamp, he will allow all kinds of terror of this sort just to see what we'll do with it.

After all, it may be just this desire to test God's patience that got us into the Iraq War. People with a sense of certainty about knowing what God wants us to do had occupied the White House. After all, President Bush reportedly said that he knew God wanted him to run for president. I'm sure they felt like the hand of God raining down on Saddam Hussein along with the bombs dropping. The idea of the righteous war is very Old Testament, but mixing theologies never stopped Christians from pressing their agenda. And the New Testament idea of turning the other cheek never really caught on either. Vengeance motivated the United States' response after the bombing of the Twin Towers. I'm sure the missile silos were rumbling. The only problem was where to point them. It wasn't a specific country that had attacked us, but a coterie of people. Terrorism is multi-jointed and diffuse. There is no pinning it down to geographical borders. But a war was needed. President Bush supplied us with one out of a misguided sense of justice. It would be God's justice. America remains favored by God above all other nations, so whatever it does must have an element of the divine in it. Just how President Bush came to a knowledge that God wanted this is a problem. Does God ever want war? I guess it depends on which version of God you're asking. Perhaps this war resulted from an apocalyptic mindset that suggested an attack on the United States meant that the Second

Coming was imminent in some way. After all, people like Jerry Falwell were screaming that 9/11 happened because of gays and lesbians. Preachers were increasingly coming under the impression that waiting for the lord's return wasn't good enough. They had to do something to make it happen.

The worry that Jesus would come back and find his most favored nation looking something like Sodom just wouldn't do. It might mean a bad judgment for everyone. God didn't single out any one person to punish in Sodom. The whole city was destroyed for the reason that it was apparently corrupt. In fact, in the Old Testament, it seemed that whole peoples were targeted for destruction. Everyone seemed to rise or fall together. Even Jesus seemed to be debating one monolithic opinion of the Pharisees whenever he had his famous disputations with them. Individuality may just be a modern conception and the one thing that has messed up the modern Christian. In their desire to know the mind of God, as we have discussed, they have enclosed themselves in a solipsistic universe. The Iraq War was an example of just how far the madness extends when people don't check out their conclusions about God with people with cooler heads. But then, these others may just have the wrong idea since the original inspiration happened in the head of just one man.

So what about this idea that corruption, what religious people have labeled sin, could mean doom for us on judgment day. Is judgment day just a Christian idea or does whatever power that supersedes us want a final reckoning? Ay, there's the rub. Just how universal is this idea of judgment?

The uncomfortable truth may just be that we all want to be judged. We spend our lives wondering if anyone truly sees us, not just in the sense of visual perception, but also

in the sense of being truly understood. We want to know that we are acting in ways that bring a sense of approval from others. “Thou shalt not judge,” Jesus said, but we judge each other constantly, sizing up the strengths and weaknesses of those we connect with as if each passing second were a referendum on our ability to stand out. Why else for the celebrity worship? We have a class of people who regularly get judged successful because they have lots of money and fame. We admire business people who get the plum jobs and drown in barrels of cash because of their acumen. We all want to be successful, and when we aren’t, we feel deficient. We have judged ourselves badly, and believe that others share the same appraisal because standards of success in our culture are rife with the idea that if we don’t stand out, we have failed. This begs the question of what success actually means, whether to think of it in material terms, or spiritual terms, or in some other way that takes into account the situation and abilities of everyone who seek a positive judgment from their peers. But the fact remains, judging goes on with breakneck speed, at the speed of our thoughts about other people’s levels of success.

In the book, *Les Miserables*, the character by the name of Jean Val Jean has managed to escape from prison where he was put after committing a fairly minor crime. He stole a loaf of bread. But Victor Hugo lets us into the mind of the character when Jean bitterly judges himself after stealing a coin from a little boy, demonstrating that he has not recovered his sense of right and wrong. Still afflicted by this thieving mindset, he takes advantage of a bishop’s kindness and seeks to steal his silver possessions. The police are there, but the bishop does not turn him in. He has judged Jean to be a redeemable person and the bishop sends him on his way with the wares Jean meant to steal, now transformed into a gift. As the story continues, Jean does indeed redeem

himself and becomes something of a hero. All the while, he is being pursued by Javert, a policeman who remains convinced of Jean's guilt. At one point, Javert becomes completely amazed at the transformation of his perpetrator, and, unable to process the new sense of justice he finds himself in, throws himself into the river.

Jean Val Jean has become a transformational figure, one who has changed from a criminal to a sort of spiritual hero because he becomes capable of great acts of good. Javert represents the need for justice to pursue its ideal of the changelessness of the face of what it judges to be evil. Once one idea of heroism confronts this rigid determination of guilt, the only possible outcome is the death of an old order, one that no longer suffices to explain the existence of a uniquely spiritual as opposed to a temporal hero, one who is proven courageous in a war or some other proving ground. The Christians would see in this story the truth that justice requires a sacrifice of an innocent in order to usher in a new order of the possibility of change, of good becoming capable of revealing a new type of hero, one that has transformed from a state of guilt to one of innocence. Jesus, after all, was entirely unsuccessful as a military messiah. He could not become the king of the Jews because he had other fish to fry. He had all of mankind to save. In the upside-down logic of the Christian, he succeeded by being a failure. Just like Javert, who could not fathom the possibility of a spiritual hero, the world was unable to digest the presence of a man who proved to be sinless even though this seems impossible by common sense standards. He could not be accepted because he brought a new order in his words and deeds. The unfortunate thing about old orders is that they have to die. Caught in the crossfire, our new spiritual hero, namely Jesus, straddled the coming change in insight on

what it means to be an innocent, and paid a terrible price for his foresight. The judgment of the world is often wrong, and yet we seek its approval with every fiber of our being.

This interesting paradox between the desire to be judged by something that is notoriously bad at getting the judgment right shows that we are helplessly trapped in a web of circumlocutions. No matter how badly we want to get the judgment right, if we are the ones doing the judging, we are fated to fall short, precisely because we are unable to stand back from the situation, to get to a position of neutrality where the judgment has a chance of being a good one. But God has an interesting role to play here. He already exists in a state of indifference, so if he is the one doing the judging, we have a fairly good chance that he will get it right. But if the Christian story suffers in its accuracy about the status of reality at the end of things, can we count on God to do the right thing by us? Can God be any better at judging us just because he is in a better position to judge?

Herein lies the problem of judging. No matter how much we believe that receiving a perfect judgment from God will satisfy us in some way, it just may be that there is no such thing as a good judgment. Maybe that's what Jesus meant when he asked us not to judge. It could be because there is no way to guarantee that anyone will be able to pull off what we so badly want: being actually understood, which, we hope is the purpose of a perfect being's presence in the universe is for. Since God is so lackadaisical about our belief in him, it is unlikely that he can render the judgment we are looking for. He wants us to judge ourselves. I believe that the more we detach ourselves from seeking the approval of other people, from foolishly believing that we can know the mind of God, the more we are able to avoid falling into the pitfall of the Christian's judgment day. We

are our own spiritual heroes. We are alone. God will only part the Red Sea so many times before he gets us to realize that there are boats to get across oceans without his interference. So are we really as solipsistic as the Christians after all?

No. We are only alone in the sense that there is no one to help us with the delicate task of succeeding. First we have to figure out what success means to us, and then implement it in a way that avoids the wish for an objective judgment. When we succeed at judging ourselves, we finally have a good judgment because the ineffectiveness of judgment overall has been negated by the ability of an individual to see through the paradox of living in a world incapable of rendering a good judgment and leaves us with the task of spiritual heroism, which means we don't have some abstract need to be understood. We want to avoid hell by transforming our lives into things that will avoid hell for us, not by relying on outside agents to keep us out by the sheer power of their illusory comforting presence. The world is cruel. We make it less cruel by craving a kind of success tailor made to our own abilities. Hence, we avoid the judgmental by avoiding the very concept of judging itself. We have avoided it with a new paradox. We negate judging by judging ourselves with the transformational sensibility of there being no really good way of doing the judging except in the eyes of the God who hopes we won't need him to punish or reward us abstractly. There is no way to punish a creature who can't be held responsible for something God himself does not expect of the creature. So what would our game-playing God really want us to do with our lives?

It may be impossible to know. Maybe the point is to simply spar with God as if he were a martial artist we had to continually learn how to defeat through repeated

conflicts. Then we would have a case of God *training* us to play with him on a level both opponents would eventually feel that they were equally matched. It seems that the kind of being I propose exists in the universe—exists only for our benefit when we are willing to stop the senseless game of divining his mind and begin playing a game designed to alter our perspective on what it means to live. God doesn't seem to want us to understand him so much as to *challenge* him. He really craves the satisfaction of a well-played match over a loyalty that no one can adhere to. He doesn't care if we succeed, only that we ceaselessly, compulsively entertain.

Perhaps this can morph into an explanation for the cruelty of the world. People who suffer are kind of like mountains. They are simply there. Since anyone of us can be tapped for a painful event, the likelihood of a sufferer complaining that God has abandoned him may be valid. God can't seem to intervene in the life of the sufferer because there are issues of free will and, ultimately, how much power God can wield publicly. Since people exist as a source of amusement for God, the ones who get tested can wish for an intervention, but the reality may just lie in that principle of inevitability again. Some say we have feet of clay, that we were molded by God on the day of creation. Perhaps the sufferer simply resisted the mold. And since God had these recalcitrant people who couldn't defend against the cruelty of the world, their exposure becomes their entire universe. They are outliers. They exist, but that is the extent of their favor before God. But even the sufferer can play the game. The conflicts in his life pit him against his God in a unique way. The matter of a successful resolution may live a very private life, one not even accessible to the player. The mystery of where evil comes from and why some but not others are subject to it probably means that the game, such as

it is, can only be evaluated at some distant point in the future, like when we're all dead and the aims of God are made plainer. It seems that there really is a judgment day.

So the problem of hell remains. This instinct that there is a place where the guilty are punished runs so deep because the Christian narrative is one of the foundational myths of our time. People needed rules to follow, some program that would tell them what to do, how to do it, and how to avoid the pitfalls of human corruption (read sin). So came the instructions to Moses in the Old Testament, and the Biblical canon of scriptures in the New Testament. They are there in our culture because they are easy. No one needs to think too hard about how to offend God. Since it is practically impossible to not offend God, the best option is to adhere to clearly laid out rules, the kind that we have in our Judeo-Christian tradition. But since it is not so easy to avoid sinning, then looking for someone to pay the price, so to speak, needed to come along. Whether that person can be said to be Jesus will be a topic for the next chapter. But for now, we have to hope that the judge is Jesus and not the paranoid god that is the subject of the solipsistic Christian's dream. It seems that salvation can only be extended to the people who can say safely that they are followers of Jesus. This means that there are wide swaths of people who fall outside the accepted parameters. In fact, hell ought to be considerably bigger than heaven since there are a lot more people eligible for punishment than reward. But to this point, just how much is God willing to forgive us? Must Gandhi burn too because he is a Hindu and not a follower of Jesus?

This idea that Gandhi could burn exposes some of the limitations of Christian thought. There are plenty of other religious traditions, like Islam, that would qualify for the Christian ideal of the bad judgment, and hence the unhappy trip into eternal

damnation. This runs us into another idea. It goes like this. Let's say that the Catholics accuse the Protestants of getting the Christian message wrong and that unless they convert to Catholicism, they will be subject to damnation. The Protestants, on the other hand, have just the opposite view. Without conversion into their camp, the unlucky believer will burn. Even though they both believe in Jesus, someone seems fated to wind up in hell no matter how devout their worship is. This brings up the principle of exclusivity. Not only can the way be said to be straight and narrow, but it can also be said that there is only one way. How did we get into this pickle?

Now it seems that not only do we have to worship Jesus, but also, we have to worship a particular view of Jesus. Now those simple rules have grown complex. It is no longer good enough just to believe in Jesus, one has to exclusively adhere to one view of him. The Mormons say we got into this situation because there was a falling away of the true church somewhere along the way, and only by believing in a restored church do you avoid the problems of the other wrong-headed perspectives. This would be fine except it doesn't remove the problem at all. In fact, it makes Mormonism the most exclusive of all the other possible approaches. Now, unless you are a Mormon, you cannot be truly saved at all. If your church happens to be titled the Church of Christ or the Church of the best, most ultimate knowledge of God, it does not matter.

All of this finger pointing makes for a tough decision for those of us who wish to stay out of hell. It's God again, taking pleasure in our willingness to take seriously things that really aren't serious at all. If the mere fact that a proliferation of churches were determinative of where we spend eternity, then there is hope for nobody. The principle of exclusion, by definition, must be wrong. Otherwise, full advantage would go to the

preacher, priest, or minister who, by virtue of their office, would be considered closer to the source and hence in a better position to be judged well. They would be the only ones we could consider shoe-ins. And the irony is, they are the greatest propagators of exclusivity. At this point, we may take an “all roads lead to Rome” approach. The only problem with this compromise is that all the “roads” have checkpoints looking for heretics at every turn. So who makes the rules? Who is to say who gets to point out the canonical reality, the religious universe that is the one accurate portrayal?

Some cultures are better at handling ambiguity than others. Westerners are notorious for handling it badly. Christians seem bound and determined that there be an absolute reality. There must be either good or evil, either Jesus or the devil, either right or wrong, either salvation or damnation. Maybe what we should actually be seeking is a kind of maturity. What this means is that we are very good at being babies, and looking at the world in black and white terms, but very bad at being adults, and seeing all the nuances that make the world a complex collection of opinions and truths. Nietzsche liked to deconstruct the very idea of a fact, saying that it can always be broken down into a series of alternate explanations. Even when we say that the world is round, we must break that down into three-dimensional terms and call it what it really is and that is a sphere. Furthermore, the earth has a particular location in the universe, a position in the solar system, and a collection of physical constants that give it its unique character as a place where life can thrive and people like us can ask questions about the universe because we are aware of it. Aristotle said that there is religion because of the stars and dreams. In order to make sense of either we have to look both outside and inside ourselves for the answers.

Questioning the nature of reality is not only a human characteristic but also a characteristic of a certain level of cognitive maturity. If you ask a child why there is a God, he will probably tell you that God is a father and thus is there to protect us from all the bad things that can happen. An adult will understand something the child does not. The world is not fair and there is no guarantee that we will always enjoy protection from all the bad things out there. In other words, the adult has an experience of the world that the child does not. In the midst of this experience is the wisdom which all human beings hope to acquire upon all their travels. Moving away from the naïveté of the child requires more than just advanced age, however. There must be an acknowledgment that the separation from the child's perspective must be sufficiently strong enough to count the new perspective as an advance. Gauging this requires the adult to accept the notion that most perspectives, including his own, are wrong. This is where the embrace of ambiguity becomes so important. With the understanding that people are wrong more often than they are right, an advanced mind would be able to accept that he must abdicate on the notion of a total understanding of anything. Faith then becomes a belief that whatever is out there, isn't there to seek our doom because our ability to assess the threat is considerably compromised by the inability to see it.

Which brings us to a point I haven't covered yet and that is the existence of a devil. I have mentioned that Satan rebelled against God and fell to earth along with about a third of the spirits in heaven, so it only stands to reason that he is here, tempting us, and generally seeking our doom. Oops. There really is something out there seeking our doom even though we're completely helpless against it. The devil is nowhere more evident than God, and yet we are supposed to defend against him. But the devil is the

ruler of hell. We are taught that it will be him who tortures those who get damned. But is the devil really the creator of evil? Can the devil really create at all?

The Christians get kind of tangled up in this concept. God created the devil, so the devil must be subject to God. But even so, shouldn't the devil be somewhat independent of God in order to wreak the havoc he does? Could it be that the devil is just a human recognition that free will must be a reality in order for God to be good and for people to exist who are found worthy of damnation? People couldn't very well be damned if they had no responsibility for their sins. There can be no hell without free will or else God really isn't good. This is a question we have to explore further.

I mentioned that God created the devil, so it stands to reason that even before the devil rebelled, God knew he would because he created him for that purpose. God does know absolutely everything, doesn't he? So the question emerges, why would God create a being he knew would turn to evil? In many ways, he created us even though he knew some of us would choose badly. According to some, we are predestined to be saved or damned precisely because, like the devil, God has foreknowledge of everything we do, so we get stuck in that free will versus determinism thing again. In the introduction, I raise this question with the argument that in order to be sufficiently distant from God, in order to make choices that are truly independent of him, we must assume that even God has limitations on his knowledge. Uh-oh. If God doesn't know everything, is it possible to refer to him as a god? And furthermore, if we can trust that God is godly, then he must have created evil, meaning that God isn't such a good guy after all.

This is a thorny dilemma. Unless we are willing to give up the idea that God knows everything, we can't say that we actually choose anything, since we were created to do exactly everything we do. And if we say that God doesn't know everything, we can't say that he is God, because, by definition, God must know everything in order to exist. Knowing everything is a *condition* of his existence. So here is the problem. God creates, but we have to find a way not to hold him responsible for all the *consequences* of his creations. So to solve this problem, we must have an argument for free will somewhere, don't we? There is a proposition that is called the compatibilist position because it says that determinism and free will are compatible with each other. How does this work? Just because things have to happen in a certain way does not mean that people would not have chosen to act that way anyway. We may be compelled to act, but we must contain within the compulsion the idea that we would have chosen it anyway. After all, we can only really uncover the consequence of a decision *after* it happens. There is no way to tell if the outcome would have been the same or different than the way it turned out if someone made a choice or was forced to make the choice. Thus, free will and determinism are compatible with each other because they work together in an odd way. There are problems with this of course. And the problems are amplified if we throw God into the equation, which must have created the rule that makes free will and determinism compatible with each other in order for us to be able to call him a God. The reason we have this problem at all is because of the western conception of the creator God. If we remove the word creator from God, then we have a very different sort of creature than the Christians worship. And also, we can see one of the problems with the compatibilist theory since we still haven't removed the idea that because God knows

everything and has created everything, he created us to succeed and be saved or to fail and be damned. In this case, free will and determinism really aren't compatible because the author of everything is God, so *someone* in the causal chain of events does know the outcome *before* it happens. And not only that, but the event was created by God, because that is what he does. So what is the verdict? Is God a good guy or not?

It would seem we have a problem with distinguishing between God and the devil. If the two were two aspects of the same being, then we would end up with a God who is rather human looking. He would have the same nature as a human, meaning that God has a good side and a dark side. This would mean of course that God is the devil and the devil is God, they only appear different because one side chooses to do evil while the other side chooses to do good. Then, God would be schizophrenic. Only the voices he hears in his head are not illusions, but the ravings of the dark half, who wishes evil on the very things he has created. This would also seem to make evil more understandable as a concept in the world. Since God is a tortured soul, he can't control everything that results from his decisions. But this isn't what we're really saying, is it? Evil, we seem to be saying, isn't chaotic and vengeful, it is a counterpoint to the other possibility, the good. If God does exist, and there is an after life that renders suffering temporary, then we don't need God to be perfectly good, we only need him to remain in balance. All the messiness of life would stem from our reflection of him in ourselves. The really bad things, like war and genocide, would only appear bad; they would actually be the workings of the dark half whose homicidal mania gets counterbalanced by the fact people only appear to be terrorized. There will be an end to the suffering since the afterlife assures us that we will not suffer at the hands of the dark half forever. Except for the caveat that some of us

will be damned and thus the dark half does have dominion that the good half can't prevent. Hell, then, gains a distinction as a place where God is, and furthermore, it is natural to assume that hell and heaven are really non-distinct as well.

The saved only know that heaven is a place where they will be happy. There actually isn't much more information than that. The damned, on the other hand, go to a place of suffering. But if heaven and hell is the product of a God who is both good and bad, then the state "happiness" could apply to all of God's creations, whether they go to hell or not. Camus has an answer for how this is possible.

Camus wrote about the myth of Sisyphus, which talks about a Greek hero who put Death in chains so that no human had to die. The gods didn't like this very much, so they released Death and put Sisyphus in an after life where he was given a pointless task to do for eternity. They had him roll a stone up a hill, only the stone kept rolling back down the hill, where Sisyphus would have to roll it back up again, and again and again into eternity. Camus makes an interesting statement though. He says that Sisyphus is happy.

It seems absurd of course to say that someone who is condemned to roll a stone up a hill for eternity could be happy, but the torment gets mitigated by time. Sisyphus does not have to believe that he will never complete the task. Even though the stone keeps rolling back down the hill every time he rolls it up, the moment before the disappointment is one of expectation that something could change. After awhile, he would begin to look forward to that moment of expectation. He would come to know the contours of his stone, its imperfections, and its characteristic features. He would come to love the stone, since it requires his entire attention, his whole reason for being. Eventually, he would become so accustomed to his task that it would transcend second

nature and become a manner of being, a struggle that has meaning only in the doing. His afterlife is ruled by the second to second struggle with the stone. His attention is no longer split up by everyday demands. Now he becomes completely unconscious of the reason for the stone, only that he has to move it. His consciousness is singular. Sisyphus is happy because time has removed the need to think about the task and replaced it with the sheer satisfaction of action.

Just like Sisyphus, those of us who get damned and have to go to a place where torture is the norm, it will eventually come to appear as a heaven to us. Even though we know that our days are filled with discomfort, time will accustom us to the flames licking our feet. And since the mad being called the devil is really just another aspect of God, our world will be ruled by divine principles that will be designed to make us happy. Who knows, the damned may be happier than the saved because they have something to do whereas heaven remains more of an unknown that could be boring and more uncomfortable than hell. The damned know they get tortured, but the saved only know that they are going to a reward, whatever that is.

The Spiritual Athlete

I have spent a great deal of time ruminating on the Christian perspective. As I stated before, it bears really scrutinizing it since it is the foundational myth of our time. But a book lampooning the religious tendencies of us all could not be complete without dealing with the originator of the Christian religion, and that person is the incomparable Jesus. He runs around Judea healing, exorcising, teaching, and arguing, as if he were some sort of spiritual athlete whose only reason for being is to constantly spar with the powers of evil until his inevitable death. In fact, the only way to really read the story of Jesus is to understand it after it happened. If you were in Judea at that time and encountered the spiritual master himself, you, like the Jews, might be very taken to head scratching when it comes to an opinion on just what exactly he is up to. There is a considerable distance between who Jesus was during the time that he lived, and making sense of his life all these years later. The gospels were written at just such a distance, perhaps forty to sixty years after his death, and it is very evident from the conclusions they ask you, the reader, to make about him. In fact, this is the main literary strategy of the gospels, and that is to get you to make the judgment just who do you say that he is.

This question of Jesus' identity plagued everyone throughout the whole of his career. It could be argued that not even the twelve disciples themselves truly understood that their master was the redeemer of the world. So we should spend some time discussing just what the gospels are up to when they attempt to describe and unravel the various narratives about Jesus. There does seem to be a very specific literary strategy they employ that includes this desire to insert the reader in the story in order to discover the true identity of Jesus. The strategy goes something like this: Peter's confession,

Jesus' rebuke, and then finally, aside from his death, the transfiguration, where, for a moment he gets transformed into a divine entity who then has a conversation with Moses and Elijah. First, Peter's confession.

On the question of Jesus' identity, one day while Jesus and his disciples were gathered together discussing one thing or another; Jesus asks his famous question, who do you say that I am? Peter answers correctly at first, calling him the Christ, or the messiah that has been long hoped for all throughout Jewish history. The only problem is, Peter then gets it wrong since he thinks that Jesus' success will be marked by a particularly temporal victory. At this point, Jesus makes an astonishing rebuke. He says, get behind me Satan. It is almost as if Jesus thinks Peter has allowed the tempter to use him as a mouthpiece to reduplicate the temptations Jesus experienced in the desert. Peter got it completely wrong. Jesus was meant to be a suffering messiah, something that none of the apostles were prepared for. Even though there are times when the reader, even with the gospel interpreters in his hands, can wonder if even Jesus truly understood his own mission, the fact that Jesus feels the need to align Peter's statement with that of the devil's truly defies rationality. For example, for all of Jesus' insistence on taking care of the downtrodden, like saying the meek will inherit the earth, at another point he says that he has come not to bring peace but a sword. The two different pieces of Jesus' teachings seem to suggest a disconnect in the way that he even viewed himself. Jesus seems to be getting nowhere with his insistence that not only do people continually misunderstand his mission, but that his own friends are constantly reinforcing exactly the wrong kinds of perspectives on the point of all his battles. Just before Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, his own confidant Mary, while grieving her brother's death, tells Jesus that he

should have shown up a few days earlier in order to prevent the death. Then Jesus wept. The people around him think that he is crying for the loss of his dear friend, but actually, he is weeping because Mary has not understood that Jesus has come into the world to reverse death itself, something he wishes to demonstrate by raising the dead. Jesus seems surrounded by misunderstanding. To him, to have come four days earlier would have meant a more minor miracle. Now, he can reveal more of himself by performing a miracle that no one has ever seen before. Lazarus is so dead that the people adjure Jesus not to go into the tomb, for he “stinketh.” But of course, Jesus merely musters his spiritual prowess and ignores all the unbelief around him by performing the greater miracle, reversing the effects of death.

And now that we know some of the pieces of this literary strategy, we can turn to the transfiguration. Jesus goes with his disciples to a mountaintop, the same kind of mountaintop that Moses came down from in order to deliver the Ten Commandments, purported to have been written by the very finger of God himself. And what should happen there except Jesus gets to throw off his human identity for a minute and appear before his friends as a truly divine being. They can see that Moses himself is there along with Elijah, and they have a conversation that is not revealed to the reader. All we know is that Jesus has been “transfigured” from a mortal into an immortal just long enough to hopefully cure the misunderstanding that constantly surrounds him. But even this display does not ameliorate the situation of distinguishing between a triumphant Messiah from a suffering one. In fact, Peter is so shocked by the party come to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane that he withdraws his sword and lops off the ear of one of the soldiers.

He still doesn't understand that dying on a cross is the destiny of his master. The idea of the suffering messiah has hardly sunk in.

But then again, the literary strategy of the gospels has only the function of getting the reader to come to the conclusion of the writers, who think they have teased out the reason for Jesus' existence, and that is the revelation of his divinity in the form of a mortal who wins by losing, who triumphs by appearing to fail. Unfortunately, this gets us no closer to understanding the "historical" Jesus, the Jesus who might have actually lived in the fin de siècle of the Roman occupation of Judea. Isn't it important that the Romans are there after all? Jesus did die of crucifixion, a particularly Roman form of execution. The Jews might have stoned him if they had their druthers. But the Romans were the ones who killed Jesus, despite all the anti-Semitism that followed in the wake of the rise of Christianity that basically vilified the Jews for the crime of killing Jesus. Jesus was a Jew. Although, because of his virgin birth, you might be able to argue that, since the Holy Spirit was the one who impregnated Jesus' mother, that Jesus' DNA might have been free of real human taint. That makes it problematic that Jesus was a Jew at all, or even human. There was a group of early Christians who tried to argue that Jesus was never human, that he occupied a human personality somehow, but traveled through his life neither alive nor dead at all. After all, how does one kill God?

The climax of the story, namely Jesus' death, does carry that uncomfortable question with it. If it weren't for the day of Pentecost, when the disciples received a particularly strong outpouring of God's spirit which caused them to really feel the strength of the legacy Jesus had handed them, they may never have coalesced into a

group at all. Jesus' death was a blow to his followers, who mostly did not understand the concept of the suffering Messiah.

But, of course, it is important to trace the events of Jesus' untimely death (he was said to have died around the age of thirty) in order to ruminate on the *life* of Jesus. The gospel of John has Jesus going to and from Jerusalem a number of times, seeming to establish a pattern of visitation, while Mark has him only going in once, the so-called triumphant entry. The gospel of John does a better job of helping us understand how the crowds appeared and why there seemed to be a recognition of what he represented there. But then again, the gospel of John is keener to demonstrate a divine identity for Jesus than the others, at one time having Jesus mention that he and his father are one, a statement that seems to set the stage for the later doctrine of the Trinity to emerge. In order for the various narratives of Jesus' identity to coalesce around the theme of a divine identity, Jesus has to die in order to reverse the principle of death itself. Conquering death seems to be the whole reason for his being on the earth. As we examine the events of Jesus' death, the force of its inevitability can strike us.

The first signs we have that Jesus' death is imminent occur with the debates he has with the Pharisees. Since he is always getting the better of them, they seem to be constantly plotting his demise. Caiaphas, the high priest, at one point tells the other priests that it is *necessary* for Jesus to die. It also seems unlikely that he had come to this conclusion because he really believed in the suffering messiah, but that he had concluded that Jesus posed some sort of threat. This also seems like a disconnect because Jesus really seems to be quite harmless. There certainly were other healers and exorcists acting at the same time Jesus were. But the gospels are keen on letting the reader know that

there is something special about Jesus that would have set him apart. Whether the crowds he gathered at his sermons numbered in the thousands or just by the dozens is really impossible to tell. The real scope of his following hinges on the question of his identity. When Jesus first starts amassing his disciples, people wonder whether he could be the reincarnation of Elias, or, in the case of Herod, the reincarnation of John the Baptist, who he had beheaded in order to keep his word in some weird way. This minor theme of reincarnation seems puzzling in itself. We usually associate reincarnation as a concept of the eastern world and seem out of place in a book that becomes revered by the western world. I personally don't know where it comes from. The Kabala does have a principle that suggests that once a person's lineage had been corrupted; someone could be reincarnated in order to right it. But Kabala did not emerge as a separate community until much later in the history of Judaism. Why people felt the need to speculate about Jesus' identity in this way is a problem best left to the scholars. All I can do is point out its existence in the New Testament as a device meant to get the reader to tease out that identity question along with the contemporary observers of Jesus all, of whom seem obsessed with it. But to get people to understand the need for a suffering messiah needs to culminate his life with a gruesome death as a way to reinforce the point that Jesus was divine.

One of the puzzles about the death narrative is the effect of the crowds. Just days after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the crowds appear out of nowhere in order to not only witness Pontius Pilate's famous offer of Jesus' freedom, but crowds had just previously appeared to herald his coming into the city as a messianic figure. It seems that the gospel of John had the pattern right, and that Jesus was known in the city for his

apparent gifts. Just why the crowds turned on him may either suggest the presence of an opposing faction, or just window dressing to enhance the importance of what came to be known as his passion (a word that first meant suffering).

During Jesus' trial, the people who judge him are themselves being judged. When they ask Jesus if he is the King of the Jews, just Mark has him saying, "I am." In the other gospels, the response of Jesus comes in the form of you're saying it. He meant that the judges were being asked to decide on that penultimate question of Jesus' identity for themselves, to ascertain whether or not Jesus deserved to die, with the emphasis on "deserved" because it hardly seems possible that Jesus deserved the cross, a particularly Roman form of execution. In order to fulfill the scripture that states even as a sheep before his shearers is dumb, so did Jesus become remarkably non-defensive. Others had concluded that Jesus' death was a divine suicide, which seems to be the case if you review how little resistance Jesus offered up in his defense. Even Socrates attempted to answer the charges, but Jesus is forced into the ellipsis of the scriptural prophecy. The crucifixion is fraught with scriptural references in such a dense way that it becomes impossible to disentangle the event from the predictions. The gospel narratives seem to do everything to obfuscate rather than make clear the "actual" circumstances of Jesus' death.

One of the likeliest scenarios is that Jesus was put to death merely to quell the crowds. Since there was a lot of unrest among the people due to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, that they had indeed suspected a messianic person had just entered their midst, the Romans would feel compelled to execute Jesus as a warning. On at least two other occasions, governors were taken to Rome to explain why they had been ineffective at riot

control, so the harmless teacher had to be made an example of. What this also means is that when Jesus was finally put on the cross, he would have died alone. It is unlikely that any of the disciples or Jesus' mother could have been on hand because it could very well mean their extinction. The Romans would not have allowed suspected insurrectionists to continue operating once they had been discovered. The "dumbness" of Jesus was probably a literary device meant to explain the presence of his body on the cross as a sort of divine suicide, but his actual presence there could have been the tragic result of popularity.

So if the gospels are intent on presenting the divinity of Jesus and the actuality of his life and death in a way that is at odds with the official record, how do we get to any understanding of how Jesus actually lived his life? In order to get at the historical Jesus through the gospels, we have to turn to the literalists. Many Christians believe that everything in the Bible is literal. Therefore, we can take the gospels at their word that the events of Jesus' life happened just in the way that is described within their pages. Oddly, if we take this idea seriously, we can deconstruct the descriptions of Jesus' life with the gospels as an unreliable witness, something we can wield like a tool in order to beat the literalists at their own game. For the true believer, this would be an unthinkable exercise. For them, Jesus went around healing and exorcising, arguing and teaching just in the way that the gospels describe. And the question of his divinity is not really a valid question, but a given. Without this conviction, their obsession with Jesus would melt into a puddle of useless veneration. Jesus is the beginning and ending of the Christian faith. So dominant a force is he that without settling this question of his identity as the true suffering messiah, they would hopelessly flail in a perpetual state of puzzlement. Does

this mean that the Christians are a credulous bunch, taking everything in the Bible as the God's own truth? Actually, tradition is a very strong influence on religious thinking. Since the Christians have no reason to disbelieve the reports of the gospels, they have every reason to ground their belief in the thing that not only supports their faith, but, without which, their faith would fall like a house of cards. Nowadays, the Bible is used something like a crystal ball. Since there is no reason to doubt the historicity of the gospels portrayals, the only thing left to do is to mine the stories for clues into their own identities, to summon up meaning to not only life's great questions, but also the diurnal concerns that afflict them, which a quick reference to the gospels will cure. They don't puzzle out the gospels as a whole, but rather, how the gospels are speaking directly to them. And it is here that we can begin the task of pulling the rug out from under them.

Jesus spends a lot of time teaching in parables we can begin as the first conundrum. When the disciple's question him about this, Mark has him say that he is concerned that the people will actually understand him and become converted. He seems to abhor the idea of being openly understood. This idea seems to conflict directly with his wish for Peter to understand him as the suffering messiah. But we have to understand that the statement to Jesus from Peter about his identity is said within the close confines of their own meetings. From our perspective, some of the parables are quite simple to understand, like the one where he describes the seeds falling on different kinds of ground. It only seems natural that the seeds that fall on the fertile earth would grow into a great tree of faith, but at the time that Jesus aired this parable, the people who heard it were vexed. Even the disciples required interpretations. What seems simple to us appears to

be complicated to the people of first century Judea. There always seems to be a tension between keeping things hidden and allowing other things to become revealed. Jesus was always rebuking the demons he cast out not to reveal his true identity, constantly adjured the people he healed not to publish this fact abroad (even though they invariably did), and of course talked in parables in order not to be understood. But he was keen that people understand his messiahship. When he cast out the moneylenders out of the temple, he told the priests who came to rebuke him that he this temple would be destroyed and he would rebuild it in three days. Obviously, he had to know they would take him as literally referring to the Second Temple, but he was actually referring to his own body. By this time in his career, he had already confirmed to himself the fact of his own resurrection. This incident shows a curious cross-section between hiding and revealing since he seems to be doing both at the same time. The reader will know exactly what he means because they already know the ending to the story, but the priests would flounder in utter perplexity over just how this blasphemous statement could possibly be accomplished. Jesus seems bent on being ambiguous. For a man who was fatally afraid of being misunderstood, he went to a great deal of trouble to confuse people about just what his words actually meant.

If the gospels are presenting a complicated Jesus, a man who swerves back and forth into revelations that either confuse or torment, they are also trying hard to sell you on the idea of something that, again, the reader already knows, and that is the divinity of his identity. We can see this in the story of the virgin birth. According to the official story, the spirit of God impregnated Mary, and the result was the very incarnation of God. Just why God had to reject a natural insemination is far from clear. But there are earlier

myths of other virgin births. One origin story of the Buddha has him being birthed from the side of a white elephant. In fact, the Bible seems replete with confusions of present realities with older myths from other cultures. For example, the Garden of Eden story seems based on an older Mesopotamian myth of the demon snake. And the Tower of Babel also has an older precedent in Mesopotamia. In 1280 B.C., a famous baptizer who is also beheaded baptizes an Egyptian God named Horus is born from a virgin, and yes, Horus gets crucified. This confusion of myths should bother the reader, but perhaps out of ignorance, or out of an assumption that this is all coincidence, the gospels still go on as unquestioned historical documents.

The truth about Mary probably comes closer to her being something like a temple virgin that unfortunately gets pregnant whereupon the temple priests scramble to find a man who will marry her in order to avoid embarrassment. Making Jesus a bastard doesn't fit into the messianic expectations so virgin birth stories are drawn upon to explain the fallen woman's place in a divine hierarchy. Angels and dreams serve to cement the story into place and whala, we have the first miracle, the incarnation of God happening in a more palatable manner. The Mormons have a strange take on the virgin birth. Since, in their theology, God is a man with flesh and bone, God actually has sexual relations with Mary and the fact of a broken hymen doesn't bother them as much as it does the rest of Christianity. Purity plays a very strong theme here, not only in Jesus' birth, but also in the fact that Jesus never marries and is very severe about people who divorce, saying that those who marry a woman who has been divorced is committing adultery. Later, the Catholic Church would systemize sexual purity by banning birth

control and instituting a class of men and women who abstain from sexual relations as evidence of their higher devotion, their very betrothal to God.

And then there are the miracles to contend with. On one occasion, Jesus heals a man's withered hand on the Sabbath, something which seems to offend the Pharisees. The only problem with this apparent transgression is that, at that time, healing on the Sabbath would not be really all that controversial. As Jesus himself points out, no one would let a sheep fall into a hole without getting him out for fear of its life. Just why the Pharisees would object to his little miracle becomes something of a puzzle. Perhaps the whole point of the story is to paint the Pharisees in a bad light. At one point, Jesus calls them "whited sepulchers" as he is brandishing his anger over their failure to recognize the signs of his divinity, those signs being his miracles and healings. Jesus' whole arguments with the Pharisees usually have something to do with their over concern with purity laws, such as Jesus allowing his disciples to eat corn when they should be fasting. The only problem with this is that Jesus should be thinking about how the purity laws are a method of equalizing the various social strata. Everyone is subject to the purity laws, so one of their purposes is to make everyone coequal. This is a principle that Jesus insisted on throughout the course of his career. In one parable, a rich man ends up in a hell while a poor man goes to heaven all because the thing that made them the same was the judgment of God, which does not discriminate between classes but only adherence to his laws.

The report of another miracle seems quite pointless because he changes water to wine. If he performed the miracle because the people had not prepared properly for their feast, then it would only seem prudent to either make them go out and get their wine, or refrain from doing it because the miracle comes to seem trivial. It also borders on the

miracle being done for selfish reasons, a thing he was convinced he should never do because of one of the devil's temptations to him in the desert. During that temptation, Satan tells Jesus to turn a stone into bread, to which Jesus responds that man does not live by bread alone but by the words of God. The real point of the temptation is to get Jesus to perform a miracle for selfish reasons, something he seems committed to never do. But the water to wine miracle resembles this temptation he had to defend against in the desert. Was Jesus performing miracles as signs of his divinity or is it the gospel writers' attempt to force the miracles to serve the function of hooking the reader in?

Michael Grant suggests that the miracles were actually simple stories first, stories that suggest the kind of effect he had on people and only later were interpreted as miracles. For example, the miracle of the fishes and loaves had the crowd hearing Jesus' sermon suddenly growing hungry and the disciples suggest that they go into town in order to acquire food for them. Jesus tells them no and a young man is trotted forward with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fishes. According to the gospels, Jesus takes the bread and fishes and multiplies their volume so that, miraculously, a crowd of hundreds (dozens?) are fed from just a few loaves and a couple of fishes. But perhaps the story really signifies a miraculous act of sharing. The people listening to Jesus' sermon were from very disparate backgrounds, and getting them to share their food with each other when there was such a need would be an accomplishment in diplomacy. But this is not the way it was described in the Bible. By the time this story reached the ears of the evangelists, it was only a matter of a little tweaking to turn the event into a miraculous one.

Even today, we have preachers who bet the bank that they can heal people who come to their revivals. The people dutifully swear that they had suffered an affliction for years, and presto, they are miraculously healed. We can be suspicious that they actually fell prey to a little autosuggestion, or that there were plants in the audience who come forward to sell the preacher's healing powers. I even watched one televangelist move his arm in the direction of the audience and they all swooned as if they had been felled by the hand of God himself. In fact, there are spontaneous remissions from cancer. There is even a famous story about a little girl who was about to undergo a lobectomy on her brain and all the functions in that hemisphere of the brain migrated to the other side so that she survived the surgery with all her faculties intact. These things are medical mysteries, but don't we stop short of calling them miracles? There are things we don't understand, things that science can't explain, but everything that invades human consciousness can't just be saddled with a blanket religious explanation or else it becomes practically impossible to investigate anything because we always have the default position that God did it. This was the uncomfortable position that Descartes found himself in when he severed material things from mental ones, a position famously known as dualism. The only conclusion he could come to was that God was responsible for every human action, making Him very busy indeed.

But what of Jesus' miracles? Do we assign a special category for divine interventions even though we can't really make the judgment that any one thing (or person) could possibly be responsible for absolutely every unexplainable event in the universe? The gospels really aren't saying this, are they? They aim to present Jesus as a special form of human, one who combined both the attributes of the simply human and

the utterly divine. If he did it, then God did it. That's all we can know. The Christian obsession with Jesus is no more than a cult of personality. And the theologies that the various gospels present are the attempts of evangelists trying to systematize without any systems. All they had were a handful of stories, stories about a very special person who came into the world and never really left. He didn't die after all. On the third day of his "rest" in the grave, he rose again, reportedly appearing to around five hundred people. Oddly, it is his resurrection that makes him the most human. What use is it for a God to rise again when a God can't be felled in the first place? This brings up an interesting point. If Jesus was God, what makes his life different from a robot's?

Jesus not only became renowned for being the messiah, but also for being the only human to have lived a perfect life. This makes for a complication. If God lived a perfect life, then we would only expect as much. He is God after all. But how do we resolve the problem of Jesus, being both God and man, living a perfect life when he could not have lived an imperfect one? Wouldn't his whole life be just a superfluous exercise, since it couldn't be distinguished from that of a robot who must live as programmed as well? If we are to distinguish Jesus from a robot, we have to make him capable of failure. Hence the paradox: a god who can fail. He must be both fully human and fully divine. This is something that really can't be resolved. There is no real way we can administer some kind of backward Turing test that proves Jesus was indeed both a human and a god. We see some of this difficulty in the later doctrine of the Trinity. Maybe because of pressure from the pagans who worshipped many gods, and also pressure from the Jews who worshipped only one, the Christians felt it necessary to avoid the charge of tri-theism since they had to include three aspects to their formula for God, a Jewish God,

a monotheistic God: God the father, his son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. The reason they have this difficulty is partly because of the way they read the Bible, which means that they must make Jesus one with the God of the Old Testament, and partly because there are mentions of three different people as being deities in the New. They run into the difficulty of making three persons into one God. One might say, after examining the doctrine of the Trinity, that they are a little over committed to monotheism. The mental hoops they have to jump through hardly seem worth it. It goes like this.

God, in order to be God, must be uncreated. Jesus and the Holy Ghost have to be distinguished from God as three separate persons without violating this caveat that they are not creatures, i.e. also uncreated. Thus, the Father is not Jesus. Jesus is not the Father. The Holy Ghost is neither the Father nor the son. But, they are one god. They explain this by saying that the son was begotten of the father, not created, hence the need for the virgin birth. Jesus is to be part of the one god formula by remaining uncreated like the father, but what of his resurrected body, his humanness? Augustine explains this by saying that God can use materials at times in order to show himself, and then discards them to withdraw back into the Trinitarian concept. This explains why Jesus was still in possession of the stigmata (the marks on his wrists and hands) when he appeared to his disciples as proof that the person standing before them was actually Jesus and not just some ghost or figment of their imagination. His body seems to be some kind of stage prop. But one wonders if modern Christians would agree with the ancient ones that Jesus' body was just a sign of his "recovery." After all, the Book of Revelation has Jesus coming back to creation fully embodied, not as a ghostly personage who must remain tethered to his other parts in order to maintain the integrity of monotheism. What we

might call the problem of the body goes to the heart of the paradox that Jesus was both God and man. Removing his humanity once he has “returned to the father,” a phrase that suggests his separateness requires some complicated argumentation that really ends up folding in on itself. The individual Christian is left with his faith that the theologians have gotten this right despite the mental gymnastics involved.

Perhaps it would be easier to dispense with the literalists and see the three persons as symbolic of a one-god formula. Perhaps Jesus is the only God. But then what about all this talk of the father? Another explanation is that Jesus thought he was not God himself, but in perfect contact with that God. In this scenario, Adonai would remain the only God and Jesus simply his mouthpiece. This idea would force us to see Jesus more of a prophet than a god, which is what most people at the time believed him to be. But there are obvious problems for the committed Christian if we strip Jesus of his godhood. Since they rely so much on the fact of his being God, they have no other choice but to accept the complications of the Trinity and forestall the horror of realizing that they really have been Jewish all this time. In fact, the ancient Christians began asking themselves how best to admit gentile converts into the flock when they were observant Jews. Paul settles this by saying that people don’t have to get circumcised or follow the Law of Moses necessarily. There is even some evidence that certain Christian sects promoted the idea that the only rule worth following was sexual chastity. Since this provided consternation among the husbands of the women who subscribed to this point of view, it is easy to imagine that a sect such as this would eventually die out.

Another sect that died out was the Gnostics. They tended to promote the idea of a spiritual maturity as the way of getting into heaven. To achieve this, one had to awaken

to one's true identity, learn secret codes and special knowledge (gnosis) in order to slip past the evil gods known as the Archons. To them, God was alienated from his creation. It was really a mishap that the world was created, and the souls in the Pleroma (a spiritual plane) were cast into bodies that functioned as prisons. Some Gnostics held that while Jesus was on the cross, he was laughing because his spirit hovered over the broken body that he no longer (or never) needed. But the Gnostics were very conscious that they were building mythologies when they told their stories. They used a lot of symbolism to get their point across, and some of the stories even appear tongue-in-cheek. One such story has the Archons creating Adam and then being satisfied because they failed to give him the use of his legs and he couldn't get up and walk. But Sophia (wisdom, and also female) created Eve who came along and restored Adam to wholeness. Now, it is unlikely that the writers of the myth truly believed that the whole Garden of Eden thing actually went this way, but they told the story to demonstrate a point: one of those points being that God was not only not in charge but that there were other beings capable of creating things, there were a multiplicity of gods. In one Gnostic theology, you can count as many as 365 heavens.

But evil resides among these gods. The Archons are the enslavers and also the guards meant to prevent escape from the earth. But also, there is a god called the demi-urge who foolishly believed that he was the only god, rejecting the father of all and all the female deities such as Sophia. This demi-urge was thought to be the God of the Old Testament, who was jealous of the other gods, saying that humankind should worship him only. This mistake was deliberate. Adonai is evil. Jesus is sent in search of a pearl of great price, in the "Hymn of the Pearl," but gets waylaid by "falling," or, in other

words, losing his way in the darkness of the earth's deviousness. He falls into drunkenness and is only later awakened whereupon he completes his true task. In Gnosticism, even the redeemers need a little redeeming. But some of the Gnostic writers were from Iran and were not even Christians. The writers all shared these doctrinal similarities that God is an alien, not the only god, and that people need awakening in order to secure their salvation.

The personage of Jesus continues to vex. Was he a mythical creature as the Gnostics suggest, or was he an actual person, as the literalists suggest? All we have on his historicity are the few brief mentions of him by Josephus, a Jewish historian, and the testimony of the eyewitnesses who circulated the stories that eventually became the gospels. Perhaps he will always be shrouded in mystery that only a little faith can cure. But are we to put our faith in a person who actually visited the earth as God, or is there a more mundane explanation for his existence? The world may never know.

The Tao of God

We don't even give much thought about the methods God uses to either rain down his wrath or give us his blessings, these assumptions just seem embedded in the belief system we happen to subscribe to. When a Dover, Delaware court decided not to recognize Intelligent Design as "scientific" enough to teach to schoolchildren, Pat Robertson warned Dover that something tragic would happen to them. An Old Testament view of God had reared his ugly head, and this angry being was expected to vent his emotions by punishing the evildoers. The modern tension between God and science seems to boil most hotly over this issue of whether evolution somehow erases religion in its emphasis on a more "natural" explanation for the existence of things. In a rich irony, Darwin had been studying for the seminary when he embarked on his voyage with the *Beagle*, and it would be his discoveries amidst his travels that would shake the foundations of society forever. One scientist called Darwinism the greatest intellectual idea to ever be unleashed on an unsuspecting world. Now, evolution is accepted as the most legitimate theory on the origin of things, something that vexes the religious who see this as an assault on their very manner of being. If God did not start things off in the Garden of Eden, then what else is disturbingly mistaken about the scriptures? This seems to be more of a challenge to individual faith than religion writ large but there are those pesky literalists who can't get over the idea that the Bible was not only divinely inspired, but historically accurate as well.

I begin in the scriptures in this study of God because it is with precious little other evidence that we have of his existence. The fact remains, though, that religion has been no better at establishing a proof for the existence of God than science has been at disproving it. There seems to be a very large area, a blank space if you will, where

nothing can be said about God beyond the claims of scripture or the people who claim to have direct experience of God. Sometimes, the non-coincident coincidences (what people have called the God thing) that happen to people provides enough proof for the believer that God exists, but this still doesn't remove the suspicions that some other agency effected the experiences. In other words, a spirit who has neither love nor hate for human beings could be responsible for the experiences, a sort of useless benefactor who likes to toy with people, so the exact nature of God could be so hard to pin down that we have to live with so much ambiguity on the subject, and yet we don't. Descartes said it best when he suggested that we have no way of knowing whether an evil genius was feeding us information that seemed real, but could just be an illusion existing beyond the boundaries of proof. We can live our whole lives never knowing whether the God thing was the result of a loving God looking out for us, or a plot hatched by the universe to make us think that. One would have to wonder with what motive such a being might have or even if it was a being at all, but the problem is, how do we get from a suspicion that our lives are being guided by a loving God, or just that things just seem this way?

Here is where philosophers have grappled with this age-old question about establishing the existence of God using proofs that are about as useful as tireless wheels. But there you have it; a centuries long conversation that begins with the idea that something other than evolution brought about the world and ends with the idea that we should just discard the question altogether and let science march on without the hindrance of a theism blocking its way. Thales, a pre-Socratic philosopher, once said that all things are God, sort of a nod to the idea of pantheism, which is the idea that everything in the world is alive and immortal, interconnected and meaningful. This idea seems to lay the

groundwork for a view that the question of God is really moot since God is everywhere, and like a raindrop, evaporates into the background so that a conversation about the existence of God can never get started because there is nothing to be said. It is pointless to doubt something that need not be revealed since there is no neutral place between this world and some idea of a next one. Things simply happen the way they do because that's the way the world is built.

Aristotle is largely credited for starting modern biological taxonomy, but he also could not get away from the “larger” questions, so he called God the unmoved mover. He meant that there had to be a sort of first cause for things, something that has to be outside time and space so that the next cause, so the movement into the physical world has to be the result of this first cause. It can't be moved because it has to be at the absolute beginning of everything, something before which nothing else can exist. This idea has set the stage for the idea of the infinite regress. How can it be that there isn't something behind the first cause, something behind that, and something behind that, on into infinity? Aristotle would probably answer that the infinite regress is a useless argument because it is simply obvious that, once we have established the fact that mover can't be moved, then it is a priori an absolute beginning. Later, Christians also would not be bothered by the infinite regress because, even though they want to say that God created the world and there results a certain tension about who created God, they think that the scriptures have established that there is one God (monotheism), and the question about creation begins and ends with this assumption that there can be only one God.

So, the matter really comes down to faith: faith that the scriptures are giving it to you straight and faith that the God thing really comes from a loving, personable God.

The only problem with faith is those who are not initiated into the religion have nothing to hang their hat on. Their conclusion becomes that there is no God at all. He is an illusion or worse, a delusion. And so the conversation about the existence of God continues, with each side claiming to have the more forceful premises.

And then we have Buddhist ideas to contend with. Some scholars have called Buddhism an atheistic religion because they don't have the concept of God anywhere in their thinking. It is true that there is no God in Buddhism that they do not worship in the same way a Christian might. Instead, Buddhists hope to accumulate enough merit in this life to ensure a good reincarnation in the next life. The Tibetans will chant over the dead body so that the soul, as it wanders through the dangerous bardo, will become successfully reincarnated and not be lost in space indefinitely. The central issue in Buddhism is how to overcome karma in a way that will effect a "good" reincarnation as opposed to a "bad one" but the point that is important is that reincarnation and not a heavenly home is the driving concept in their sense of continuation. In order to break the cycle of rebirths, the individual must become enlightened and eventually enter into Nirvana, a place where individuality is extinguished and the soul comes to rest in oneness with the universe that remains in place for eternity. At first blush, this idea can be scary because the cessation of being and thought can seem so at odds with the linear transcendence of Christianity and the individual's extinction isn't exactly a heavenly home where the luxury of painlessness and spiritual fulfillment can operate. But the question arises, how can the two systems of thought be so different? How come westerners are so bothered by the idea of God and easterners are not?

Cultural differences seem to be part of the answer. Reincarnation is so embedded in eastern thought that people think to doubt it is absolute lunacy. Over time, the west came to view a God perspective to be the only answer to theological questions because Christianity had taken such hold of the social imagination. The cosmos was so full of meaning that fear of black magic and natural evils impinged on human identity to a point that rescue was sought in the only available belief system that seemed pointless to doubt. Thanks to Christian ways of reading the Bible, the Old Testament became seen as an indisputable prediction of Jesus' coming and thus began the Judeo-Christian tradition. It was believed until very recently that God invented morality and passed this information on through the ancient prophets down to the ethics of Jesus, whose ideas were then systematized into an organized religion. Since these pre-modern societies were so interested in the way God works in the world, a great deal of speculation hinged on the transmission of God's ideas to later generations. Now, churches and spiritualists alike believe that they are part of a great legacy that instantiates all of western religious thinking in an individual who increasingly became interested in how to live according to these prescriptions.

The Buddha had to grapple with existing Hindu ideas that were much older than the body of beliefs he discovered. For one, dropping the idea of atman, or core self, meant innovating an idea known as No-Self. Since the individual is no longer embedded in Brahman reality, reality itself becomes something of an illusion. Human beings were no longer expected to cling to a sense of self. In fact, the opposite was true. Clinging to things in reality was seen as a sure way of incurring damnation, in Buddhist terms, remaining in the cycle of rebirths. Since the Buddha decided that Life is suffering, he

proposed a plan to bring about the cessation of suffering, a plan known as the eightfold path. But transmission in Buddhism came about in a reliance on cryptic scriptures, like the Dharmapada, the collected sayings of the Buddha, and sutras that explored the essence of Buddhist teaching. Things got so complicated in Buddhist transmission that in one of the Buddha's sermons, he held up a lotus flower, and only Kasyapa understood the meaning of it, a situation that gave birth to the response of silence, the preeminent teaching in Zen.

As a consequence of this higher doctrine of Buddhism, theologians came up with the concept of emptiness. This meant that all things are "emptied" of all concepts, ideas, and stratagems for living, leaving people to wonder just what it was they were supposed to do. Now with emptiness, there is nothing to save and nobody, not even Bodhisattvas, who are compassionate beings who have foregone entrance into Nirvana until all beings are saved, to do the saving. Nagarjuna, who was an Indian Buddhist of the Madhyamika School, explained how this situation could be so by explaining the doctrine of the two truths. At the conventional level, things in reality operate just the way they always do, but there is a deeper truth, the ultimate truth, where all of reality extinguishes in a paradox of possible outcomes. This was the situation that Buddhists found themselves in. On the one hand, they were supposed to go about their lives obtaining merit and chanting with the monks in order to secure salvation, and on the other hand, knowing that there is nothing to do because there is nothing that exists in any concrete way. Enlightenment meant fusing the two truths into one mystical fiat where the individual raises above all earthly attachments and becomes saved.

Buddhism and Christianity seem so different from each other because of the set of assumptions that were handed down to them. Tradition became the watchword of Christianity, while innovation became the bon mot of Buddhism. They developed in such different directions that cultural anticipations became very different. God inserted himself in the west so completely because of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and God absented himself from the east because the old gods of Hinduism dissipated under the guiding hand of the Buddha. The west became increasingly more secular because the God-sized hole in the universe could be rejected as a consequence of centuries of argument over whether the old God (singular) could just be a product of ancient memory and myth. Traditions can stumble over the fact that they can be broken. The novelty that results from the break can leave room for godless speculation, something that leaves some to flee into fundamentalism and others to leave the whole conversation behind. Despite this new secularism, God is like a bad hangover that won't go away. Christianity still holds the imagination of the west because God won't go to bed, he won't quit plaguing the individual with nagging fears of hell. But the centuries where God had his day leaves modern day theologians with the old arguments they still debate to this day, and this brings us back to the conundrum of trying to prove that God exists.

Of the classical arguments for the existence of God, we will be looking at three. The first of these is the cosmological argument for the existence of God. Remember that in pre-modern societies, the cosmos had yet to be placed in the context of a wider universe of planets and things. Communities were tightly woven together and the beliefs of the whole were expected to be the beliefs of the one. Since the idea of "cosmos" meant that the beginning of closely held beliefs was the same as the beginning of

everything, God was a necessary being. This meant that in order to have humans, or contingent beings, there needed to be a being that human beings depend on for their existence. Thus, in the cosmological argument for the existence of God, God is seen as indispensable in order for reality to hold together. Without Him, the cosmos falls apart, and the earth descends into a state of nothingness. Here, God is seen as a cohesive force, keeping the order of things from falling into disorder. There is a bipolarity of structure and anti-structure that are both necessary for the concept of God to adumbrate in the world. But if one can successfully argue that humans are sufficient in themselves for the perpetuation of their being, then the communal cohesiveness of a necessary being becomes unnecessary. The cosmological argument fails when the boosters of self-sufficiency win the day. It is far from clear that we need God to keep reality from flying apart in different directions, because even if we accept that God is necessary, he may not be necessary for humans. Certainly, evolution has this effect on things. The concatenation of randomness makes the cold efficiency of a meaningful world suddenly outdated and unable to keep pace with the progress of science. Now that we feel that there is no idea of a cosmos as such, but a universe where the individual is free to have his or her individual opinions in a widely divergent field of possible opinions, something only bounded by the level of credulity anyone allows himself. God can be thrown out of the conversation when we realize that everything can be schematized along a distribution of paths. Nietzsche can say, "God is dead" and get away with it.

The ontological argument for the existence of God is driven more by intellect than physical impingements. Anselm noticed that there is a ceiling to possible thought. Once one bumps his head on this ceiling, he can claim that he has discovered God. Anselm

formulates it this way. God is the greatest thing beyond which no greater thing can be conceived. Descartes found that because he could think of this perfected thing, this perfected thing must have come from someplace other than his own intellect and thus have an objective existence. The faults of this argument may be easier to see. Let's say, for example, that we conceive of the greatest island beyond which no greater island can be conceived. Just because we have imagined this glorious island does not bring it into existence. The response to the ontological argument seems to be that physical things cannot result from mental ones. But this objection fails if we assume that God is physical. If God were just a glorious idea, not a glorious thing, then it would be possible to argue that God could exist if he designed our intellects as a mirror of his own. Transcending our puny intellects may be easy enough to accomplish if we just elevated our intellects to the greatest possible plane of God's abode. But perhaps this is too mystical and not part of the original intent of Anselm and Descartes. Perhaps it should be mystical, but it isn't. The ontological argument seems to be saying that existence is the result of a successful imagining. After all, God must be a thing "outside" of the individual, so getting from the inner to the outer requires a great leap. Indeed, even Descartes did not believe in the effectiveness of his own series of causes. He believed that God had to be responsible for everything that humans cannot do for themselves, which is virtually everything. And he also seemed reluctant to come out of his own head when he says that because fire has burned him, he has to assume that this unwilled thing has an objective existence, something he seemed reluctant to admit. Descartes' dualism seems a little effected by a tinge of monistic idealism. Berkeley, who believed that there was no existence outside of a perceiver to observe it, also seemed to argue in this vein. It

is only because God is the ultimate perceiver that we can say things have independent existence at all.

The last of the arguments we will be examining is the teleological argument for the existence of God. This means that there is a “goal” or purpose to the world being as it is. In order to discover meaning, we simply have to prove that God has ordered the world for a specific reason. That reason might be the redemption of souls or just a playground for God to test his theories about the extent of human experience, but this argument is also known as the argument from design.

We met this idea before when we met the theologian who said that once we have come across a watch in the desert, we have to assume that there is a maker for it. The only problem being that a watch is obviously made by a human whereas the world is not so easily crafted. But if we insert the idea of a telos, or an end into the scenario, we seem forced to assume that the world has been designed by an intelligence because we don’t just float around on this pale blue dot, we do things, and some of those things have religious implications. If man is made for the purpose of discovering God, then it means that there should be a God who needs to be discovered. So, the whole design of creation seems constructed to reveal the hand of a creator. Intelligent design, the modern form of the design argument, likes to emphasize the fact that things are just too complicated to have gotten there by accident. The eye, a favorite analogy for this group, is so complex that it would require some very specific tweaking in order to operate properly.

Evolutionists counter that the eye would survive natural selection because it is the most effective way for a being to adapt to its environment. Once the animal is able to see, it can deal with predators and threats more effectively than being without sight, so the

appearance of an eye would be a natural result of survival. The Dalai Lama noticed a limitation to the survival argument since we really can't know that something survived until after it survived, making the argument circular. But if things were designed to reveal God as the maker, then Buddhists would have a problem because they don't believe in one. The design argument only works for those who are determined to activate its stronger premises. The very presence of suffering seems to militate against a designer, because why would the designer make something that doesn't work properly? Why all the drama of a savior when the world could have been made better in the first place? Either the designer isn't benevolent or human suffering isn't considered significant enough to eradicate from the beginning. But this gets us back to the problem of evil.

If God created goodness and virtue, why would evil be a necessary condition to see that goodness realized? If God created everything, then he created evil as well. In fact, he created a being that he knew would defy him, the devil. Furthermore, he created us, beings who also defy him at every turn. Actually, with the help of Elaine Pagels, it turns out that the idea of an evil being called the devil is a rather modern twist. Earlier speculations simply referred to the word *satan* in Hebrew, which has the original meaning of Opponent. This is especially evident in the Book of Job, where, before Job's suffering begins, God and Satan simply lay down their cards in a bet. With Satan simply and playfully wanting to "test" Job, in his attempt to better his father, the burdens Satan places on Job really shows two things. First, Job was not being punished as the text implies, neither was he the subject of holy wrath or target of the displeasure of God. It appears that God and Satan believe human beings are not really real in the sense of their fleshiness, but sort of mundanely wander the earth unaware of their ultimate unreality.

Second, in reading the text, it becomes obvious that Satan and God are always debating in a continuous and protracted conversation that probably never ends, as they are both immortals. Since God had favored Job, Satan, with God's permission, simply wanted to get the upper hand. And surprisingly, Job seems to intuit all of this. The religionists are actually not only missing the point but also falling prey to misreadings.

In our modern world, what Christians call sin leads to all sorts of bad things, things so bad that genocides happen, the eradication of whole peoples. Perhaps Hindus would have an easier time with this problem. We even have to wonder about the nature of evil altogether since it's possible to persuade ourselves that evil only exists as a potentiality. It isn't God's fault that evil gets realized from time to time. And since evil may only be an appearance, goodness too is only an ideal. We're like that guy who desperately tries to keep his plates rotating on the end of his poles without dropping them. If we get really good at keeping the plates moving, we may never drop one. Our ideas about God bounce around our mental spaces as an almost rupturing between tectonic plates that only through mental gymnastics do we get to a place of serenity. Not only may some unknown being be fooling us, but also we may be fooling ourselves that without a better understanding of how God works in the world, we have to maintain a strict separation between good and evil, that, as I discussed previously, may just be the result of an insane God.

Anyway, it becomes pretty clear that we can't get to a proof of God logically, and we can't know if we are being duped by an uncaring being. God is the slipperiest of creatures ever devised and yet we can't get Him out of our heads. Is he just a hangover from medieval forms of thinking? In other words, should we consider him extinct,

somewhat like the dinosaurs that were destroyed by a severe impact from an unavoidable impact? Maybe we have been so impacted by the modern bombardment of a more sophisticated society that we are a destroyed people. We don't know that our souls have been killed by forces beyond our control, so as a result, we wander around in zombie-like fashion wishing for something that can never be: a certainty about the great Unseen. And yet should we feel hopeless about all the difficulties of looking for God, and choose instead to fight for our beliefs? We do have a pretty good idea that life can seem meaningless and yet we seek for meaning in it like mad hatters working a party that never ends.

The threat of meaninglessness in our lives leads to a very pungent angst. We wind up feeling very anxious about how our lives will turn out when the search for meaning becomes an illusion. This doesn't rule out God per se, but it changes the conversation about whether or not He exists to one where the pressures of living mount an assault on the human personality. Where Kierkegaard will acknowledge the anxieties of an impersonal world, he still thinks it is possible to approach God as a possibility inserted in the foundations of being because it is part of our telos to initiate the search. Meaning can be found by transcending the mundane implications of existence for a sort of attendant humility that the tremendous, unknowable God can be *experienced*. Others, like Heidegger, see the human individual as trapped in a reality he calls Dasein, a position that "throws" us into a certain anxiety-ridden position. We are so hopelessly fallen that that we inevitably worry about the authenticity of our existence appositely from meaninglessness.

For Sartre, as expressed in his play *No Exit*, the hell we end up in is the hell that the sheer presence of other people has helped us create. The conditions of hell are somewhat comfortable, but because other people are there too, he coins the term “hell is other people” to show that we are interminably bound to a community that damns us with its impingements. He was an atheist, so obviously the play is pure parody for him. But it makes the significant point that our evil feelings for our fellow humans follows us into a sort of darkened world where we suffer the human accident of selfishness. For him, existence is about mining the depths of meaning by giving up on the idea of transcendence, or ascension into an alternate world by dealing with the present conditions of existence and finding meaning in the free will of our constituent state. In *The Wall*, he shows the absurdity of thinking that we can overcome fate by resistance to forces larger than us, but rather, to face death “cleanly,” that is with an eye toward the idea of death as a signifier of our commitment to humanism. Bravery consists not in outlasting the tormentors, but by resolving the anxiety of death through an authentic disposition towards life.

Nietzsche was not only famous for proclaiming that God is dead, but critiqued the morals of traditional Christianity as based on something he called “slave morality.” The upside down logic of the Christian message was perpetrated by a group of people who internalized the master/slave dynamic as a religion because their current conditions were so intolerable that release from this life had to be the driving function of their existence. He proposed that we become a race of supermen, who rise above the dynamic and wield the will to power as a path to authentic existence.

For the existentialists, authenticity became the watchword of their theorizing. It was not enough just to live in faith, but to deal with the anxiety about death and the basic meaninglessness of existence by rejecting a noumenal reality for a more earthly stance that makes God less important than a program to deal with these anxieties. As Bertrand Russell would later say, the earth just is. There is no amount of argument that can get us beyond the simple reality that there are natural operations which function independently of our wishing for something “more.” So now we live in a secular age that diminishes God by forcing him into a box only the faithful capable of sustaining belief in the face of the world’s coldness can satisfy the conditions of belief. This will not stop the speculation of what are we doing here, wandering in the wilderness of unexplainable phenomenon such as spiritual experience, and wondering about the nature of a being that would enable a religious explanation for the meaning of our existence. The real question boils down to, is a belief in God just the desideratum of the simple, or are there other assumptions that make the sophisticated capable of belief as well?

In the 1500s, it would be unthinkable for people to proclaim that there is no God because it would be against everything the clergy told them. The high levels of illiteracy and the lack of access to alternate opinions would make atheism as a position practically impossible. Now, some 16 percent of Americans say that they do not believe in any religion. This doesn’t mean that science has won the day. Most people don’t know much about evolution either. A lot of people who say that they believe in religion and science don’t really believe in evolution as much as they think they do because they believe people were created in God’s image. For them, evolution works for animals but not for us. They believe in something called the special creation of man, which means that

humankind are not animals because God created us the way we are and there is no need to improve on this original design. Evolution teaches that all life sprang from one original source, perhaps from enzymes swimming around in the primordial ooze. So it is useless to argue that humans are special. We are just as much a part of the animal kingdom as our pet dog. Over time, life branched off into various lines of genetically similar designs so that variety is explained as a declension from one species to another until we had the descent of man from proto-humans to homo sapiens who have their closest relatives in the apes. This affinity we seem to have with a lower species makes religionists apoplectic about the thought of humans being descended from monkeys. This is not completely accurate because our progenitors have their own branch of descent and we are now only related to apes, not direct products of apehood. But the tension between evolution and religion still has this air of two warring parties, both of whom do not really know the source of this tension or how to overcome it short of declaring the other side false. Despite the fact that there appears no way of reconciling the two sides, there are scientists who believe in God (although the number is roughly only 7 percent). The founder of the Human Genome Project himself believes in the Biblical version of God. Even Einstein believed in God, although it was hard to pin him down on the subject. He wound up saying that he believed in Spinoza's God, but he was a fierce determinist and told his followers that we were at the mercy of forces, not in control of them. It seems that to be a believer, one has to believe in freedom of choice because otherwise we would be in a situation where God made us to be bad and by abdicating our ability to choose badly, God becomes guilty instead of us since He was the one who made us do it.

So we might be able to name examples of the sophisticated who do believe in God, but we still have to ask, how do they do it? I think one thing we would find if we looked inside their minds would be a lot of paradox. On the one hand, empiricism (the assumption that the senses are the only sensible things for understanding phenomena) exists in the world, but on the other hand, the world is not completely defined by empiricism. Reality is not just the by-product of mechanized forces despite the fact that their life's work is dedicated to uncovering the mechanisms. Reality has to find room for something that science can't uncover, and that thing, that hidden thing, would be God. Just where He is hiding is something that the scientist has to bend logic a little to understand. They would say something like: just because we can find everything we need to explain reality in nature, there still has to be something we can't explain, something that makes the pursuit of science unnecessary even though they already believe that science is necessary for understanding the world. But what exactly do we mean by "necessary?"

We say that things exist necessarily, because without them, things don't make sense. An effect is necessary for a cause or else it would not make sense to pursue a science that cannot even settle on the nature of its own methods. God is not necessarily "necessary" to have a theory of the world because we can figure out that theory through other means, means that have more explanatory power than stating that there needs to be things outside of our senses in order to understand them. In fact, explaining things without using the senses is infinitely more complicated. Not only that, but using God to explain things entails a tremendous friction between competing theologies we have to refer to in order to get to a cogent understanding of how God works in the world.

Everyone can simply say that his way of understanding God is the right one, and just like that we have incommensurability. People won't be able to talk about God without fighting over it. Holy wars have been fought over the differing of opinion about who is right. So far, scientists haven't taken up arms to prove their theories. The only thing necessary for agreement among scientists is simply further study until the truth can be found.

But Kuhn showed how even scientific communities flounder in moments of incommensurability. He said that scientists are usually performing their experiments in a mode called "normal science." This means that their methods usually discover the things they are looking for. But sometimes there are moments of anxiety, like when an anomaly pops up. Quantum physicists had this problem when they found out that electrons really didn't behave the way they were supposed to. The researchers were only able to generate a probability about where the electron would be once their experimental method interfered with its operations. Suddenly, the physical world that Einstein had discovered didn't make sense anymore. The uncertainty principle rendered everything different from what it was just a moment ago. Quantum mechanics underwent what Kuhn has called the Gestalt switch. If you remember from your psychology class, the teacher once showed you a picture that could either be interpreted as a young woman with a feather in her cap or as an old woman with a hawkish nose. Which picture you saw depended on how you looked at it. Sometimes a lot of persuading had to be done by the other students to get the class to see both pictures and no amount of adjusting your glasses could influence the fineness of your perception.

In this same way, the anomaly of the electron that first used an atomic model safely orbiting around its nucleus much the same way a planet moves around the sun, broke down and the scientists were forced to “see” the atom in a whole new light. Kuhn called this a scientific revolution and the result was that, at least for a while, the scientists could no longer practice normally and had to begin arguing over the meaning of the data they were getting. Other communities of scientists, such as those who believed strongly in Einstein’s theory of relativity, found themselves in a situation of incommensurability with the Quantum mechanists who, because of their Gestalt switch, had to deal with the consequences of their new sight.

Communities of believers form both science and religion, so both are human enterprises relying on different forms of data. We might say they have different magisteria, which means that they have different but equally legitimate paths to discovering truths about the world. The difference may only be literary, however. Poetic truths are largely considered important for communicating emotional responses to its listeners in ways that paint the world a different picture than scientific truths can. We tend to rely on scientific truths to become the initiators of practical technologies or cures for diseases, and they hardly stir the soul or make us think in new and different ways. If the function of religion was only to use literary devices in order to stir the soul, then I think that sophisticates would have an easier time accepting it. Since science and religion tend to step on each other’s toes (and this is nowhere more evident than with evolution), the knuckle draggers get viewed as ruling the religious roost and religion is given a bad wrap. And this whole thing gets going with the concept of God. Did he or didn’t he create the world? Is it possible or not possible to understand God supernaturally? Are

science and religion incommensurable because neither side can agree on the elements of a natural theology? These are all questions that stem from the speculation on God, so it would seem that the Buddhists have a little advantage over us without having to prove or disprove the existence of God. Unfortunately, the Buddhists have often wound up on the wrong side of the political fence, so the advancement of their religion as a possible companion to science as opposed to an antagonist to it, could never really get off the ground. We simply do not know enough about how Buddhism would react to a scientific worldview since it really doesn't have enough of a history coexisting with it.

Buddhism is known to have rather flexible social boundaries. Many Buddhists see no problem being a Buddhist and a Christian at the same time. There is no hard and fast rule that makes a Buddhist a Buddhist. Christians, though, since they believe that only through Jesus can you have salvation, can't reverse the formula and allow a dual belief. The Christian obsession with Jesus is so strong that rather than being a formal religion, it is more a cult of personality, which, by now, only has tenuous connections to the original founder. I call these connections tenuous because there has been so much added into Christianity that did not exist in the New Testament. The assignation of hatred towards those considered morally deficient, like homosexuals, doesn't seem in keeping with loving one's enemies, which was one of the key teachings of Jesus. Christology has become a reaction to modern culture. Even Vatican II was criticized for loosening the doctrinal enforcement policies too much because they said things like Protestants and Eastern Orthodox communities were in fact "separate brethren" and there shouldn't be such a strong emphasis on the separation between Catholicism and these other communities. The desire to keep things commensurable runs deep in certain

religious impulses but the defenders of the exclusive path to God continues to torment the cognoscenti.

Will science and religion ever get over their separations or are we fated to view them as eternal antagonists? The more and more that we advance into a secular age, the memories of God may become fainter and fainter until the whole idea of God himself may sink into a state of stagnation. In the future, we may look at religion as a relic, that is reserved for only very few of the credulous. The existence of God just may drop out of human consciousness altogether and be replaced with a reverence for “this worldly” things. Certainly the concept of the sublime will never quit haunting us, but we may be faced with a situation where God excuses himself from the room, never to return.

Paved With Good Intentions

Morality can be a tricky concept because it seems to fall under the umbrella of religion. People will be thinking of making choices that have good consequences, but the motivation behind their choices is an attempt to follow a program laid out for them by their church. To live a moral life is to circumscribe their lifestyle to a point of minimizing bad choices, or choices that involve wronging God. They seem to see a direct relationship to how they affect God just as much as they affect other people or initiate chains of bad outcomes. Every time someone confronts a choice to do an either good or evil deed, they stand on a precipice which damnation has created. Morality then, can be seen as a master principle governing the lives of the religionists as if one misstep would mean the whole of their lives imploding. With so many ways to go wrong, it seems hardly a worthy concept to contend with, but since the religionists take their moral rules very seriously, we have to scan through the various moral programs that religionists see as a form of governance.

The dictionary definition of morality seems to hover around the idea of principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong, and it will be in this ambiguous territory that we will operate. I call the territory ambiguous because the origin of these principles is up for much debate. If God tells us what we are supposed to do with our lives, then how are we to know the mind of God except someone, some human, fills us in on the proper behaviors? The existence of an intermediary in this process weakens the concept of morality because we cannot directly verify that it has come from God or not. Certainly the existence of suicide cults like the Jim Jones debacle make testing the arbitrator an essential priority for the individual whom we hope is still in possession of his mind enough to make a distinction not only for forming right behaviors but also for verifying that we have indeed gotten our instructions from that ultimate source. The confirmation of a morally approved behavior will have to be a primary concern.

But unfortunately, most people will tend to make an initial choice that is which church to join, and then shut off their brains for further truth testing. This isn't blind faith necessarily because they may have made a sincere and penetrating decision that follows logically from the conversion experience they have had. But the inability to question the religion's moral rules in toto or at least as they come up in the form of dilemmas makes the case for the rule follower to be in a disadvantaged position. Their sincere conversion must carry over to the sincerity of their intentions to live a moral life or else they may have to start worrying about whether or not they are just robotically pulling levers sanctioned by their dogma and not taking the time to think through the consequences of a choice that needs a sincere intention to be a case of acting without the impediments of selfishness.

Here we have run into a thorny problem, and that is the ability or inability to execute a moral action that is truly sincere because there are motives freighted with the expectation of a reward no matter how future it happens to be. If the road to hell were paved with good intentions, then acting sincerely would be less of a general concern than an absolutely central one.

Good intentions are always wanted but *knowing* that one has them is what perhaps prompted the proverb. How do we know we are hindering more than helping someone's progression upon the spiritual path? The answer lies in rigorous self-examination, but how many people are actually willing to undergo it since a method is more or less missing? Socrates was famous for the saying that the unexamined life is not worth living, but the ability to do it runs a rather underground course. Not everyone will be able to do it, and what's more, even if one has settled on a method, how can they know that it will be as efficacious as it needs to be?

These questions are vexing and even if we have an organization willing to help in this department, it isn't clear that dogma-laden assumptions won't muddy the judicious application of it. Religions aren't famous for promoting independent thought, and even if the religion is very liberal, they will be restricted by the need to be simple in order to reach the lowest common denominator. The fact that self-examination is hardly an easy task would not make it a priority on the pastor's list. One is simply required to believe, and with the equipment of faith in one's scabbard, the battle with evil goes on more in a bludgeon like manner than the clean cut of a sword. Religionists aren't used to subtlety, preferring to view the world in black and white terms. There is simply good on one side

and evil on the other. The religionist need not think any more deeply than fighting off the evil that he perceives.

Moral choices do seem to be blown up into this grand spectacle, a battle royale between good and evil. The paired forces really should be shrunk down to good and bad, and not carry the larger implications of some cosmic battle attending every potential choice. But since God and the devil are paired in the minds of the religionists, they will tend to view every misstep a point for evil and every good decision a point for God as if all of life could be recorded on one giant scorecard. But trying to find that hidden point of sincerity still remains elusive.

Take the case of Mother Teresa. After her death, her memoirs revealed that she had been struggling with her belief in God for something like twenty years. Some might argue at this point that the inner motive is beside the point since it's the outcome that matters. She did, after all, continue to serve the poor and indigent in poverty-ridden India, so whether or not she really felt like she was acting in God's grace or not is not relevant from what we know of her actions. So sincerity isn't a necessary condition for acting like a sainted individual. Many pastors will just tell you to act as if you really believed and eventually the faith you want so badly will eventually arrive. But what if it doesn't? What if someone tries for the whole of his life to capture that belief he wants so badly but some unknown mechanism aborts the attempt? How many Mother Teresa's are out there who simply do things routinely and have no more faith than an atheist?

In our discussion on the concept of emptiness, we find a push into religious acts, making them obsolescent and place the individual into a position of anxiety. The anxiety is born out of the fear that everything has been decided already, but for Buddhists, this is

a positive thing because all they have to do is grasp the concept of emptiness and then they will wake up into a reality that is not only negative but also extremely positive since enlightenment is something not to be sought, but to be recognized. If only the Christians could promise salvation in such imperturbable ways. The anxiety for the Christian comes in never knowing when or if they will be saved since this concept is forever future. Western religion wants to keep the religionist fearful, and in keeping the individual on the brink of hell, the moral program becomes something extremely essential.

But morality often gets expressed as an imperative that opens the world into a battlefield that sweeps up the individual into this greater cosmic war. They tend to believe that this war has been going on since before the earth began, and that each instance of a dilemma only marks the individual as a participant that will either label them a follower of Jesus or the devil. This cosmic war goes on in an unseen realm, affecting the human heart with a burden that sinning is an inevitability that only through that elusive concept of salvation can they be saved. Fighting a battle that no one can win except the consequences have a real affect, an effect that can be seen, makes the convict the equal of the college professor because both are damned until God's good grace lifts them from their spiritual turmoil. The battlefield is really the human heart where the warring forces find their home. The individual then is made less human because the cosmic war has made them into pawns the God and the devil sacrifice uninterruptedly.

Thus the concept of morality diminishes since no one can know just how often and how deeply he wrongs God with his actions. Wisdom is thought to be the agent of morality, deploying perspectives with naked abandon until the individual gets confused about what actually constitutes a moral behavior since spiritual maturity is just not a thing

that religionists think about. Their rule following behavior seems enough to justify to themselves that they are acting morally. But, the only problem with this singular focus is the fact that this emphasis on rule following means that wisdom has many parts and part of wisdom is to struggle with what we might call a more minor spirituality so that the personality can reform and change until the chains of sin no longer have as much sway. But most religionists can't see things this way because they think that the Ten Commandments are the markers of a sufficiently spiritual life. What ends up happening is that good rule followers are rewarded, at least in their own minds, and those who struggle with the rules are seen as deficient, unable to position themselves before God in the same efficient way that the good rule follower has been able to do. But shouldn't we be able to tell if a religion is effective or not by the kind of people whom the religion produces?

If people with good character emerge from the ranks of any particular religion then we will tend to label that religion a good nurturer of proper behavior. But here we have to be on the outlook for the exceptional individual, or the individual who has succeeded *despite* the poor quality of his inculcation in church principles. As discussed in the last chapter, there are those who would have made themselves sages regardless of the dogma they subscribed to so whether that person emerges from an orthodox source or not, it is likely they would have thrived in any environment. The exceptional individual was an especial concern for Abraham Maslow who wanted people to value the Good and become self-actualizers, or people capable of peak experiences, something Maslow hoped everyone was capable of. He envisioned a society where denizens are fostered into a way of life where the maximum amount of benefit would accrue to everyone who is

successful at personifying the ideal Maslow envisaged. It would be enough to simply value the Good, something which is admittedly indefinable, but the good society would be one in which individual potential triumphs over groupthink in a way that ensures everyone has an equal chance at success because the terms of that success are measured qualitatively, or in a way that shows that the person has mastered him or herself in a steady climb up a talent ladder that really has no limit in Maslow's view. He hopes that some of his graduate students are secretly trying to write the great American novel because lofty goals are just a part of everyday life for Maslow. Perhaps he is thinking in Utopian terms since to remake a society in the way he implies would be to rewrite all the indices of social contract theory ever since the state of nature idea first entered John Locke's head. But, Maslow is all about producing exceptional individuals regardless of who they are or what social stratum they happen to come from because, for Maslow, there would be no social strata if he had his way in forming the good society.

For now, we have two competing views of moral behavior, deontology and consequentialism. Both of these theories have deep roots in past philosophizing about what constitutes a good choice. Deontology has its roots in Kant, who suggested that one must follow absolute duties and be a radical autonomist in order to be a functional human being. He was really concerned that people would become means to an end that came from some arbitrary power, and his solution was to treat absolutely everyone as an end in himself. He called this the Kingdom of Ends and it would be in this superlative view of ethical behavior that he prescribed his invocation of people as ends in themselves, and that using them as a way of palliating some monster's view of people as instruments in the service of accomplishing something that only ruined the ethical universe by this

monster's perversions. The categorical imperative, clung to so tightly by Kant, suggests that one is bound to a duty that can never be broken except the whole universe of moral behavior come crashing down. Just one instance of contravening this "imperative" would mean the destruction of the entire system. Perhaps Kant was too enamored of reason. He felt that without a purely constructed theory, one just couldn't have a reasonable theory at all. John Stuart Mill would have a very different attitude.

Utilitarianism is the precursor for consequentialism which is the modern version of his theory. Utilitarianism suggested that society needed to watch out for the majority, and in this pluralism, maximize the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The obvious problem is that those in the minority might be those who have to suffer the consequences. One modern thought experiment is the ticking bomb scenario. Here, we have a situation where someone is a suicide bomber caught by the authorities, who, as it happens, knows the location of a bomb that would destroy the world in minutes without someone else's interference. It only seems natural that we would allow torture in this case because the information needed is so crucial. The consequences of not obtaining the information are just too high if we do not suspend our natural aversion to the practice. Kant might just throw up his hands and say it is just the natural destiny of humankind to die, since we cannot suspend the rules under this enormous pressure even.

This thought experiment is perhaps a little loaded because the odds that we would have a person in custody and that there would be such a doomsday device at the same time seems too improbable to fathom. But the consequentialist is willing to consider the outcomes of the situation before making a moral decision. Drawing on Mill's advice that we need to maximize the Good, they will be stubborn on the point of contextualizing

moral decision-making, something Kant would be unlikely to do. Determining the outcome of a decision assumes a lot about free will as well, because we have to accept this doctrine in order to be capable of providing morally permissible decisions. One really good theory has been named after Jorge Luis Borges, called The Garden of Forking Paths. In this theory, everytime a person makes a decision, a new future is created so that the amount of potential futures becomes a dazzling array of possibilities. It would seem that this particular view would be entirely vexing for the fortuneteller in trying to identify the correct future for her petitioner. If everything were determined, then no one is capable of being held responsible for anything he does. We become like robots or better yet, zombies, who only respond to instinct and thus have no control over our behavior.

The zombie movie is a perfect example of an in-group/out-group dichotomy run amok. The problem with the movie example of the zombie is that it has to be resisted at any cost because infection means joining the thronging beings that have no control over their behavior beyond the animal need to feed. The survivors of the zombie plague inevitably feel no remorse for killing these, apparently, subhumans because to not do so is to risk their survival since they are just one bite away from joining the hated group.

The purpose of these movies is to show the clever ways that people use to survive. In one version, there was a man acting as a sniper on a rooftop with a can of beer by his side, pleasurably passing the days sniping zombies from his place of safety. What these movies unintentionally show is that there can be a sharp division between the out-group and the in-group dramatized bizarrely perhaps, but nevertheless the dynamic is there. People tend to divide themselves into groups, each with inherent interests that join them

into a discrete whole. Everyone who does not subscribe to his or her thinking is automatically classified as an outsider. Therefore, society tends to neatly divide into in-groups and out-groups in almost Darwinian fashion. It seems that the survival of the particular group in question depends on excluding those who seem less fit for the group. Outside of the zombie movies, the classic case of this was the Khmer Rouge. They took the out-group phenomenon to insane lengths, making everyone who wasn't Angkar an enemy of the state fit only to be enslaved.

At this point, an objection might be raised. What is one supposed to do with beings that are bent on eating you except kill to survive? The problem lies in the *reflection* these movies pass on to society at large. Since we now know that there are Muslim extremists who would very much want to kill us, in fact have been killing people, especially the suicide bombers who evade detection before detonating in an Israeli location, we have to be concerned that something we do or did motivated the savagery. Muslim extremists have become the perfect zombie because we have to kill them, and it is only a by-product of failing to kill them that we have them in custody. So, instead of trying to figure out how to change our image in the world, especially the Muslim world, we simply deploy our soldiers in unwelcome places where the ideological battle turns into an actual firefight.

Survival becomes the modus operandi of any justification to ensure the continuance of the group. There is a tendency for those ensconced in their particular group to feel "chosen" for their special mission to endure because the need to feel special is a strong human need, perhaps one of the prime motivators for religion at all. Those in the in-group treat those in the out-group with contempt because it only seems natural that

the chosen ones should deny the horrible hordes a rightful place in the chosen ones' circle. The more identified one becomes with his own particular group, the more he is likely to treat the others as zombies. Perhaps the stance of the monistic idealist is a natural one to assume. The monistic idealist can only prove that he exists, and anyone else's existence cannot be adequately explained. The idealist is of the same mind as the dedicated myrmidon in his group because neither one truly believes in the other's right to live, nor even if the concept of a right should exist at all.

Here we have some of the assumptions of writers like George Orwell and Cormac McCarthy, who depicted very sweeping examples of dystopias. For Orwell, in *1984*, the individual and the society at large were at loggerheads over the concept of individuality, since it was the intention of the leaders of this society to make everyone think and act in the same way, which was a perfect allegiance to Big Brother, the name Orwell gives to the governing body of this society. There were viewing screens in every house to monitor behavior, and children were educated to turn in their parents to the authorities if aberrant behavior was detected. With the implications of Orwell's novel, we can notice that the effort to supplant the interiority of the individual with a socially secure identity that unfailingly supports the governing body is an exercise in something we might call metaphysical erasure. All concepts that point to an interior life are eradicated, and hence, the result is a kind of self that becomes Self; we use the capital S because all the accoutrements that would count for a separation between the self and society have become one enormous organism where non conformity means torture or death. The individual has ceased to be completely himself and becomes something public, something injuriously policed as if the meaning of life were to learn a proper salute instead of

satiating individual desires. Hedonism, the idea that someone will always satisfy their desires, ceases to be an option and a kind of cold reasoning replaces it with a manner of being that is pure compliance and the resultant nihilism of this position would be something that not even Nietzsche could bear.

Cormac McCarthy's book is a society without a community because the society that people had had been eradicated from occurred through some form of disaster (the substance of which we are never informed of). McCarthy's book, for our purposes, dramatizes the excision of everything that made life worth living, and left society in a state where everyone began looking out for himself or herself, as if the lack of a governing body led to the lack of altruistic behavior at all. The inability to act ethically at all is demonstrated as a form of sadistic fantasy making, meaning that the context McCarthy has put us in is one in which survivors have to be so distrustful of each other that a constant guardedness attends every encounter with someone. This absence of community and ethics leaves people with only the will to survive although the point of survival seems tenuous at best, for who could live in such a degenerate state except some hope lay on the horizon? At least in the Resident Evil movies, there are always people who escaped the infection of zombies and the thought of a satisfying future still hovers ahead.

But there are even philosophers who think that we cannot distinguish ourselves from a zombie either. According to one philosopher, we are only the products of competencies that even lower animals achieve, so that we are genetically programmed to appear conscious when, in fact, we can no more tell if the person down the street has a similar mental life to our own than we can verify whether even our own selves only

produce an illusion of individuality when the truth is we are just biological computing machines that live in a land of illusion, the illusion being that we are who we take ourselves to be, when the truth is that we are just zombies who perform tasks, like going to work and making love to our wives, as we are just wetware, the captives of an illusory stream of consciousness that only superposes on everyday life, it does not exist as an entity in itself. The consequences for morality on this type of view is very dim since there is really no way to produce a moral norm when the people participating in it are unable to discern the difference between a good and bad choice since, in many ways, we don't think, we just respond to genetic programming.

So we might say that there are assaults on morality, as demonstrated by the above examples to the point that visiting the nearest church or consulting the nearest wise man will do nothing to lift us from our lassitude, makes life lose its meaning in a tremendous fall. Morality may never recover from the assaults on its ability to be a beneficial program of activity the more people assume that having meaning in life is consonant with having a good set of morals. Is it possible to live a meaningful life without a well-reasoned ethical code?

I suppose it depends on what we mean when we speak about morality. Anarchists would like to see a kind of chaos in the world, where indulgence is permitted because an adequate government, in principle, could never exist. But if we accept that the world will always be chaotic, whether we have proscriptions or prescriptions or not, then we have to find a way to maneuver the labyrinth of ethical systems as a dream within in a dream, a drama about life that turns out soporific, leading to a way of conceiving meaning without our common sense assumptions about reality. But it can seem deceptively easy to make a

moral choice since we are all burdened by consciences that deploy an emotion to the actor who performs the immoral act in a way that confers guilt. If we knowingly contravene our values, then it is natural to assume that we will have to accept our portion of guilt over the action or else suffer the thought that we have fallen out of God's good graces. But guilt is something of a western religious concept, as the Buddhist doesn't use such language, preferring instead to let the person reason out how the defective action has affected his karma. Principles of justice vary from the east and the west, especially since a creator God is at the essence of the western religionist's sense of the world whereas the eastern religions tend to hallow nature and leave the supernatural realm to propitiations made in routine ways. A Chinese man will think it best to save his condemnations of an act to the expressible aspects of his cultural programming while an American will instantly turn judgmental. Condemnations of immoral acts, after all, have the imprimatur of God with them, so the individual doing the condemning may not realize that he is actually being a proxy god. But this temptation to act in the place of God is strong. With moral inculcation so discretely tendered, individuals really have only one expectation for transgressions, and that is the kind proscribed by their religion. So telling the difference between something that has emanated from their own reasoning abilities and something that has come from God gets superimposed over each other, and the conflation of reason with belief has deadly consequences. For instance, "honor killings" found mostly among Muslim cultures, suggest that a man has a right to kill one of his sisters or even his wife if they have dishonored the family (and one of the reasons can be rape). It will be too late after the guilty one has been immolated to justify the killing as a legitimate cultural practice seen as barbaric by most people outside the culture in question.

This idea brings up cultural relativity, something that suggests acts are not condemnable by people outside that culture. We simply have to say that it is their right to follow a moral program that may seem so immoral to us. Anthropologists who study the habits of cannibalism in primitive cultures are loathe to lecture the community they are studying because it doesn't seem their place to change cultural practices, just report on them. Are we not all moral relativists in the same way the anthropologist is if we are unwilling to impose our moral behavior on others because, in many cases, we have to live among them, and if all we did was tell them how badly they are acting, then it would make life difficult. But the essence of plurality need not constrain us from recognizing things are amiss while refusing to speak our minds about it. For instance, we all thought that, during the Cold War, Russian people were probably dissatisfied with their society, but since then, their society still fails a democratic litmus test and they are not unhappy about it since basic survival concerns, like water that doesn't just turn on for three hours a day, override more idealistic concerns about whether they are moving in a democratic direction fast enough or not. But Americans are very invested in their mission as bringers of democracy to the world, and the conclusion that some society does not have enough rights to make their citizens unfettered makes for a judgmental American culture.

The struggle over the ideal of America has probably what has led us into such a fractious state, with people taking up positions on different sides of a spectrum of approaches to government, something that inevitably leads to moral debates. While the right is screaming about the evil of homosexuality, the left quivers in fear over the strident tone of the other side and so has to foster its nurturing sense of caring for the whole of society in the face of rhetoric calling them socialists. Perhaps it is because of

the left's gentleness that they have only had the White House in Clinton (before Obama) since 1980.

So public justice, something that gets overlooked when we go throughout the routines of our lives, is sometimes attenuated by the lack of control we feel we have over our lives. Even people who are supposed to have power in society, like the rich or senators, congressman, etc., feel constrained because of fear. Everyone is afraid that if they don't shirk their duty to help someone in need, then demands will be made on them for further participation, a phenomenon seen in people who witness a crime and "don't want to get involved." Altruism is really a rare quality because the application of it seems to require a rather remarkable demand. In getting out of our routines to extend a hand of help, we feel like there are only bad consequences since the need to feel safe and secure is an almost universal taint in the human condition. Peter Singer has written on how early societies learned to be cooperative because to not be so meant that one might not survive. Thus, traits of altruism survived because they were so useful in making a society. Modern culture has erased this tendency with the onslaught of a highly hierarchical structure that vaunts the successful and flouts the poor who, as victims of social stratification, seem to deserve their rank in society.

It is unfortunate that Maslow's worst worries have come true and that is that technology would outstrip moral progress and now that we have a society that is only invested in law and order, the attainment of wealth, and the condemnation of the new "niggers" homosexuals, we are looking down an industrial pipe only to see at the end of it a mechanization process that consumes us with its assaults on the self.

We all know that we have bodies that are wholly ours, and yet the tendency in thinking about the body is to treat it like a machine. Modern medicine is very good at “fixing” the human machine, treating it like it has workable parts that can be repaired or replaced, but even though it costs less and is better for us, all the research goes to the eradication of disease, not the prevention of it. This is because modern medicine is wedded to the idea that cures are kind of sexy. Scientists make their bones by publishing things that are breakthroughs, and the kind of science that would be more humanistic gets laughed at. I think a lot of people in the profession think that Dr. Andrew Weil, who prescribes a more balanced lifestyle for people only acquires a “following” while the rest of the sick people (and we are all sick in one way or another) blissfully join the mainstream doctors in the money pit that being a doctor is; perhaps there is where the problem is and that is the cost of healthcare benefitting the many medical professionals who would rather drive a BMW than a Honda.

And then we have the seeming duty of philosophers to treat our brains as if they were mirrors of our current computer technology. What will they do in a hundred years when computer technology has far outstripped what we now know is possible? Still, even though they know they are locked into obsolescence, the philosophers who think the human brain is a mechanical instrument again with parts that we can locate, such as the place where vision is pieced together or the places of speech understanding and production, we have a fairly accurate map of how the brain is structured and wrongly think that this means that it is just another discipline of modern medicine, neuroscience. The philosophers who piggy back on neuroscience are no less concerned that the human being be an “individual” than they are that the self needs to be a thing that is respected

and dignified. Instead, they merely spin theories that cage the brain in a perspective unable to shake its dedication to the mechanical thesis, and hence all the mysteries of human life all go the way of the dodo since it matters more to them to be right than to be humane.

This idea of being humane and finding its antithesis in being right sets up a dichotomy that perhaps ought to be explored. If anyone has seen *Lorenzo's Oil*, then they would realize that all the relevant information for some kind of cure X is currently available, but the routes to finding X are so disparate that X spreads across many different disciplines who are not in the habit of talking to each other, so it is unlikely that X will emerge because it would take something extraordinary to bring the parts of it together. This is a situation known as specialization. I once knew a man who had gotten his doctorate in chemistry at Yale University, and when I asked him what his field was, he replied that he studied photosynthesis. There is nothing wrong with this certainly, but I would have rather he had mentioned something that encompassed a wide array of disciplines, something that academia disallows because the professors want their students to specialize, to become an expert.

Now we have a whole caste system of experts who got that way because of the educational system in America, and it is not their habit to praise but to criticize incursions into their specialization. The consequences for the individual is that there are a whole lot of leaders who feel invested in being right since they have devoted so many years to gaining their position in society, and the ability to be humane, or to admit ignorance when it is propitious to do so, gets perceived as an offense since humanity is not their aim but specialized knowledge. No matter how much they may patter on about benefitting

society with their knowledge, it is not to be believed because there is only a dedication to prestige and proper compensation.

So we come back to the idea that moral behaviors aren't just to tell us what we ought to do, but also to help us live a meaningful life, one where pain is minimized and good behavior is rewarded in a way that can be appreciated by the moral agent. If moral behavior is based on a strict ethic where compliance becomes extremely difficult, the level of dissatisfaction someone might experience could be high. If the ultimate point of life is to be happy, then shouldn't moral programs be constructed so as to point in this direction?

With the fear of hell breathing down the religionist's neck, concerns about happiness are truncated in the presence of a perspective poignantly poised to demand a balance between the sufferings of conscience and the presuppositions of their faith. With so many ways to wrong God, repentance has to be practiced as if it were a daily ritual, like brushing one's teeth before going to bed. The force of habit, in this case, minimizes the effectiveness of repentance as a successful way of cleansing one's conscience because it becomes something like an automatic behavior, pure repetition that stunts spiritual growth because the moral agent no longer thinks; he becomes like our zombie who just acts without thought. Rote learning has been proven to be a bad method, but this seems to be the preferred method of most religious people.

In order to break the chains of guilty conscience, the moral agent really needs to assess the effectiveness not only of his cleansing actions, but also the validity of the rule he believes he has contravened. Some would object at this point that we are falling into a program of moral relativity, something that often becomes a code word for amorality or

no morality at all. Certainly, the fall into relativity is not the best idea for even those who prefer secular ethics as well, but we should be careful what we mean by relativity. If there are no moral rules to follow, and we have given up on the black and white terms of religious morality, then relativity simply means that we accept the dilemmas of life as if we were discovering a plan of action for the first time. In this way, we might say that moral relativity is a generative program since it generates proper responses as they occur, and without moral rules, the moral agent is expected to confront his circumstance with a fresh mind. What does this mean for the recovery of meaning in life?

If we opt for a sort of moral anarchy, we have to decide to charge this concept positively, so that the defective asceticism practiced by religionists only hinders happiness because they are so invested in the police state of their inner world. Moral rules become a sort of clutter that imprisons the mind with a paralyzing confrontation with something we might call the “shock of the new.” This means that people are unable to handle novelty as well as they may want to. When something new happens, something they haven’t encountered before, the tendency is to go into a state of shock, where the withdrawal of the self into itself becomes the preferred response. For example, if a person moves to a foreign country, and he cannot adjust adequately because the culture is so different than what he knows, he experiences culture shock, and the tendency will be to label the new culture as the Other. In this way, the Other is the thing that maintains a kind of “radical strangeness” to use Levinas’ term where the individual is restricted from bridging gaps in understanding because the lines are so starkly drawn. If we are to truly assimilate the novel information that confronts us, we must be willing to assess ourselves as members of a greater network of imagination each of us possesses but must be

recognized as common to anyone else we confront, so that the “shock” awaiting us can be minimized when we uncouple our presuppositions about what a confrontation intimates and overcome radical strangeness in an embrace of differences. Moral infringements into this process just contribute to the problem of difference and hence should be refigured as a collapsible artifact that can be tinkered with the more we realize the moral project should be about nurturing the impulses that produce compassion. Difference and identity go hand in hand since one will be pinioned into a particular sense of oneself whenever he has to confer a label on the behavior of others. Social stigmas, like against the mentally ill, arise because the individual tends to juxtapose his own identity next to the labeled one in a way that diminishes any potential interaction. This detrimental transference stratifies society into the accepted and the rejected, and the predictable shunning that results can deepen rifts to the point of discriminatory practices becoming the norm. If an employer finds out that you have bipolar disease, something he may have ferreted out through spotty attendance and erratic behavior noticed by other employees leads to a frightening future of unemployability because there is no consideration of safety nets and other accommodations that could be very easily implemented but due to the stigma accompanying the labeled one, the employer would just move on to the next candidate.

Moral behavior, then, seems to apply to the religiously inclined since its absence in society as a general practice remands it to the hallowed halls of religion, but then again, perhaps it should stay there because we can make a small distinction between morality and ethics. While morality is about following norms, and determining what constitutes a good choice, ethics is a system of rules we decide the efficacy of through resolving dilemmas. Bioethics is concerned with whether advances in cloning, for

instance, should be closely monitored since we have a means and ends argument. Should we allow clones to live a short life (since this is the fate of the cloned within the present state of technology), or would it be better to forego the practice because it uses some beings as means to an end, the production of separate but genetically identical beings? Here the religionist would intrude with a concern for the clone's soul, or if we are creating soulless beings, something that would be a perversion of nature for them to have beings running around whose standing before God cannot be adequately determined. Perhaps it is this issue, the clone's inability to produce evidence of its status before God that bothers the religionist more than an altruistic impulse about the status of the clone's humanity as an ensouled being. Certainly the prospect that there could be individuals without souls frightens the religionist who may want to condemn the whole practice of cloning because of this ambiguity about their souls. The ethicist would simply want to weigh the probability that more harm comes from producing clones than good because we do have decide on their status as human beings who deserve full rights under the law.

So where does this leave us for the concern with making right decisions and finding a way to find meaning in life whether that life is a God-centered one or not? Theistic reasoning has had a history of barring the pursuit of rationally procurable solutions to just about anything. People may be concerned that not using theistic reasoning would lead to the unthinkable, a world without God. But to truly reason our way into meaning is not always the best program either. Emotional intelligence suggests that there is something inherent about how we feel about something that can be more useful than intellectual intelligence. The more emotionally mature a person is, the more we can say that he is capable of following a program of meaning. The greater the

emotional intelligence of a person, the better he is at eluding the damaging premises of faulty moral reasoning, and hence the better he is at discovering meaning in life, even if the universe isn't constructed to allow us access to it. If it is true that, even though we are wired to find meaning, but the universe occludes it because of its deterministic laws, the emotionally intelligent individual will accept the absurdities of life with a casual attitude, since he rightly perceives that they are illusions created by the intentional will. If there is meaning to be found, this individual will have to work creatively with the rational attempt to strip away the myths that the universe serves up in almost mechanical style, which is why we say that the universe aborts attempts at finding meaning, but universal meaning isn't always the best way to proceed with a method of questioning, but finding personal meaning means that we have to accept the narrow fissures of truth that do give up their information for us to peruse, things that allow the individual to cull through mere images and discover those things that pass a litmus test of truth. Now truth is a very large subject and we have to admit there are different kinds of truth like scientific and poetic truths, following different paths to imparting meaning to the interested individual. But what we can say of truth, whether we are speaking of the subjective variety or the objective one, is that it uncovers something that would otherwise lie obscured. This is the idea that all truth is symbolic; it conveys more with its language than it does with its content. So, we have to become good at transferring concepts that seem abstruse into language that represents the thing we are trying to tease out of the representation of it.

The meaning making enterprise then is very indirect, just as Kierkegaard intuited, and the only way to resist the pressures of meaninglessness is to rationally enervate the

notions of truth that are most amenable to interpretation. Truth, then, is a concept that we must accept as something we can only find partially, since understanding it is a rather large undertaking. Scientific truths often get labeled as facts even when we don't fully realize how the fact works. We don't know how gravity works, but we accept the principle because it explains more than it obfuscates. But, if we recognize our history of science properly, Newton was unable to understand why the orbits of planets were elliptical, and just used the idea of God as a way of palliating his ignorance. A few hundred years later, science was able to come up with a mathematical formula that explained the revolutions of the planets without the need for positing a God in back of the event. Whatever concept that science cannot currently explain, there is good reason to believe that someone will come along to make the principle clearer even if that person doesn't arrive on the scene until very late. So what about poetical truths?

These seem to be subject to more of an individual realm. Some works of great art are so obviously remarkable that concurrence on their greatness seems to come easily. But how many writers or artists were not appreciated in their own lifetimes? Melville didn't climb the canon until the 1920's when critics were looking for more masculine depictions. And Van Gogh didn't sell a single painting in his lifetime and now they regularly get sold for millions. So what accounts for the change in consensus? Matters of taste often have nothing to do with the innate quality of a work of art. One article in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* made a metaphor about artwork being in a house, and those allowed to enter get regarded as worthy of entrance because they are simply recognizable by those who are the gatekeepers, while those denied entrance fall into the class of the unknown. Matters of taste more often than not govern the acceptance of a

piece of art more often than is particularly healthy. If the writing or painting is of good quality, then denying it entrance into the house of recognizably great works seems to be such a damaging practice that the future will probably prove them wrong despite the hardheaded insistence that the gatekeepers have gotten it right.

But it is poetical truths, or symbolic truth, that will empower the individual to find his meaning in life since it is in this realm of what Plato labeled intelligible forms that the mind's eye "sees" what it presumes to be a "pure" idea. For instance, if we were to draw a triangle on the chalkboard, it would not be this depiction that counts, but the "triangle-ness," or the idea of the triangle in its superlative realm of unadulterated concepts that matter. The chalkboard triangle is just a copy of this higher truth, and that is that triangles exist with or without them being drawn on chalkboards. We might find this a little too idealistic; to think that everything found in this world is but a representation of something that has a more pure existence, but the symbolic properties of the truth that we can depict make Plato's ideas more probable to us. If we read Shakespeare for instance, and really tolerate the language that has a way of distracting as much as it informs, we can find in his poetical approach something that can be referred to as the sublime. Sublimity is the assumption that there is something greater than can be found in the contents of any particular experience. A sunset can be sublime if we are seduced by its beauty and feel something particularly special about our being there as a witness. Whether we like it or not, works of art affect us with either a sense of distaste or an appreciation of its greatness, but the only way to judge whether we are in the presence of truth is to digest the implications of the art in our emotional precincts.

It seems that we have moved far away from God at this point, and the religionist might begin to worry that we are leaving too much to the human hand in order to reach individual meaning. Isn't life just a test to see if we are worthy to return to God in his heaven after all? But what do Gods know of humans since we are *already* removed from him by being captives in the vegetable reality. God has no more idea what it takes to be human than humans do of what it takes to be a God. And since theistic reasoning is a barrier to imagination, isn't it saner to look for aspects of the sublime in the works of men, not God? The world as it is is a cruel place, with wars and prejudices running amok at terminal velocity, so the only way to slow down the pace of our modern lives is to indulge in an appreciation of symbolic routes to truth (more often than not formed by human hands). Finding meaning in life may be as simple as appreciating a great work of art as we judge it, and not leave the whole process of canon making to the experts who inevitably get it wrong.

Gangster's Paradise

The suicide bomber really believes that he is practicing a form of martyrdom, and the fact that he often kills the innocent doesn't penetrate as a moral wrong. He believes that he will join his brethren in paradise where innumerable pleasures await him. How these two views, the incineration of people who have no connection to the "enemy" and the virtue he perceives in the commission of his act is a form of cognitive dissonance that goes unrecognized by the suicide bomber because of indoctrination. His teachers in the schools he attends often scream about America as the Great Satan and he eventually comes to feel that two such incompatible views cannot coexist peacefully. When value systems clash like this, persuasion and détente are the preferred methods for sane people, but our suicide bomber feels he is on a mission from God, and that God not only approves of the act but also will reward our bomber with glory in the afterlife. This twisted logic is so counterintuitive that it is hard for the uninitiated to understand how people can think this way. People who are so devoted to an ideology that they will violate the sanctity of life with such extreme measures seem totally foreign to us. Where does the motivation to kill come from without knowing the people who are their targets? Is paradise actually a gangster's paradise?

The mentalities of those who have no conscience are closer to what we know of people who would commit atrocities. They just act like animal predators in keeping with

their understanding of the world, necessarily skewed, but understanding comes more easily because we know that they not only have different values, but the absence of them is more likely the case. The famous TV show “The Sopranos” showed how easily some people violated any sense of ethics we know about; they killed with impunity and ran corrupt scenarios. We have a sense that people who act like this are really predators, people who stalk the perceived enemy, who more often than not is someone they just happen to dislike, and engage in immoral acts because they have no sense of right and wrong. Their paradise is the here and now, and pursuing their ends with no thought about the consequences because their paradise is the ability to act with impunity. We seem to understand those who lack a conscience better than we understand the average suicide bomber who does what he does for religious reasons.

Killing in the name of religion has had a long and sordid history. The crusades were a good example of this, pitting the Christians and the Muslims against each other in a way that led many of the “soldiers” to do some very nasty things, like raping and killing children, as the Christians fought to retake Jerusalem. Jerusalem is an interesting place these days because the three major world religions all claim it as a holy place. The Christians hallow it as the birthplace of Jesus while the Muslims believe the Dome of the Rock is the place where Mohammed ascended into heaven. Meanwhile, the Jews feel it is their divine right to inhabit Jerusalem as the Promised Land. The battle for who has more right to this city continues to this day. Pilgrimages happen all the time, and the Dome of the Rock is off limits to Jews and occupies a place where the Jews once had a holy site of their own. It is almost as if the city of Jerusalem were a perpetual battleground for all of these religions to lay claim to a place that all consider holy.

Holiness gets translated to vendettas so easily because the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims signify their conflict in the battle over Jerusalem.

Reconciling points of view should be a major concern for all religions since coexistence has to be a priority. But the fact that people are so ensconced in their viewpoint means that a satisfactory solution will probably be missing for a long time to come. The so-called culture wars in America go on with the secularists forever battling their archenemies, the religious, or more specifically, the religious right. Since American politics is so balkanized into left wing and right wing positions, the hope for a middle ground seems all but a chimera. Once Barack Obama became president, everyone experienced a momentary flash of euphoria, but it quickly dissipated as the common devil was invoked for the left, and that was socialism. America is such a hopelessly competitive society, with capitalism being the hallmark of that desire for success, so more communitarian approaches get demonized with this pejorative label. People seem to hear the word communism when the word socialism is spoken and, with the inability to ward off the association, that Horatio Alger myth of the exceptional American who has succeeded despite the odds rises in the consciousnesses of Americans who see an unfettered approach to capitalism as the only available option. People seem to forget that capitalism is heartless because it simply relies on the mechanism of exchange and the interference of a more benign ethic gets ignored because the bottom lines of companies is at stake and anything that detracts from maximum profit is seen as an obstruction that will only lead to some form of economic chaos. The poor don't really have a voice, but even if they were to find one, they would still be bedazzled by the American dream and thus dream of riches as their own version of the Horatio Alger myth is always hoped to

activate. Perhaps this is why lottery revenues always prove to be so lucrative as it actually acts as a tax on the poor who, despite the billion to one odds that it will be them who make the great score, see the winner and know, just know that someday it will be them.

This problem of conflicting ideologies, where even those who are oppressed by them consider the system the best state of affairs, can be boiled down to a religious conflict over just what constitutes a good society. The right tends to think of itself as devoutly Christian and that America is a Christian nation, something that disavows the plurality in society. In fact, many of the founding fathers had misgivings about Christianity. Thomas Jefferson wrote his own version of the Bible where he took out all the miracles in a seeming attempt to humanize Jesus, not vaunt him as the God of all. The founding fathers were concerned about the oppression of established religions that often taxed everyone, not just those in the congregation, something which violates the very principle of taxation without representation that was one of the motivating factors for the American Revolution. There are still blue laws on the books that sprang from this perspective of American appetites needing curbing in order to have a lawful society, i.e., a society governed by God. Despite the lie that America is a Christian nation, since avarice and greed complement the pursuit of riches as seen in the 2008 meltdown of the stock market, we can perhaps believe Nietzsche more readily when he says that “God is dead and we have killed him,” by which he meant that the Protestant work ethic was overlaying values in society to such an extent that the idea of believing in God was more of a wish than anything else. People just tolerate belief in religion as good for the other guy but isn’t a devotee himself or herself. Even the people who proclaim a belief in God

doesn't really believe as well as they would want to. The ideal of acting in accord with God's wishes just doesn't seem to come out in people's behaviors, as that difficult concept of altruism seems to only apply to those who share their own viewpoint. The idea of the Good Samaritan, or the individual who would cross ideological lines, just seems like a fanciful fairy tale told by a man who struggled with his own prejudices and that was bringing his gospel to the Jews. Jesus' disciple, Peter, also struggled with this prejudice against the gentiles and it took a rather fierce epiphany in order to get him to understand the universal implications of Jesus' message. But whom did Jesus die for? Is it only a limited few that will be able to experience the liberation of his sacrifice?

Throughout the ages, the sinister side of Christianity kept emerging, the inquisition being an example, and the thought of a religion devoted to the salvation of all seemed to attenuate more and more. Now there are theologians discussing the idea that hell will be empty because Jesus' sacrifice was actually meant for everyone and truer to the gospel depictions, Jesus really did come to help the publicans and sinners even more than he wanted to save those who were already good at being good. It does seem that in the Old Testament, whole civilizations rose and fell together (and in Noah we have all of humanity being wiped out) so that the idea of the individual, especially individual salvation seems like more of a modern development. In support of the theologians who think hell will be empty, it does seem likely that the Old Testament view is still active in the imagination, and the thought that just a few would enter heaven's gates seems like a degenerate concept.

Forming an idea of a universal salvation flies in the face of past theologizing that held as one of its precepts the idea of limited salvation, perhaps because of a notion that

the universe is so constructed to promote the idea of justice as a foundational principle where the good get rewarded and the wicked punished because of the desire of humankind to see people get their just deserts. But the cruelty of hell (something that means punishment forever) is increasingly being seen as a contradiction. If God is love, then why would it be so conditional? Humans are used to experiencing unconditional love for their children, but the idea of God that most people hold is one of a dispenser of justice, so that his love only extends as far as those who please him. Reconciling the judgment of God with his love vexes those who think of it as a problem, but there will be many who think the two different concepts really combine into one. They see the beauty of justice and dismiss the idea of God's love because for them, it is part of the beauty of Christianity that it has a God willing to put evildoers in hell since that makes their reward all the sweeter because they have turned out to be exceptional. It would make for a better theology if we could preserve justice as something more for the this-worldly consequences by putting the wicked in jail, and not bother much with the nonbelievers because they will have to face God alone on Judgment Day, and it is hoped that the assessment will go according to the dictates of their conscience, since it would be illogical to hold them responsible for things they had no opportunity for (considering the idea that they need saving at all is valid).

Here we have to ask under what conditions would justice be an adequate system of otherworldly concerns? Is it sufficient just to believe in an ordered universe or do we have other worries, like whether to know the mind of God is something the individual can accomplish?

I think the idea of God's justice is just a mirror of what we know of how our world works on this side of the veil. This-worldly concerns tend get translated into otherworldly concerns because we see this world as the model for the transcendent realm. We expect that our immortality is just a continuation of this world, where time gets measured in the same linear terms, and that the self I take with me into the afterlife is the same self I have in this world. Throughout the next few chapters, we will be developing different points of views on regarding the self, and I spend so much time on this because each view provides a completely different perspective than the other one, and in future ruminations, the reader can mosaically rebuild the pieces of theory in a multivalent connectivity exercise. But without a congruent conception of what constitutes the self, the belief in a consistent identity itself may just be an illusion I want to believe in, but do we have enough evidence to know that this is true?

In actuality, the self is just a myth that the stream of consciousness makes me believe because I don't see any reason to think of myself in any other way. The thoughts that troupe through my mind are just an indication of what I am; they aren't a definitive definition of my identity. The truth is, I may never know who or what I am since my consciousness is telling me that my day-to-day affairs keep sending me messages that confine identity to a concrete whole instead of revealing the complex parts that actually make up my self. If change happened in a sudden eruption of differences, then I would be more willing to accept the fact that my self is a continuous entity. But life is both slow and fast. I arrive at a sense of time that is linear because time's arrow points in a forward direction. But memory is actually revealing blocks of time to me, not the total recall that would make a stronger case for time really being linear. Since my notion of my identity

is strongly based in this notion of continuity, I will be prone to mistakes about how change actually happens. The Buddhists are really better at understanding time because they don't see time as a cause/effect relationship but see phenomena in their perceptual field as "dependent-arising." Things only happen in this world through using a false reality to portray a more stable one through a mistake in the human consciousness, and that is its need to see things in wholes. Thus, the complex parts of the personality refuse to reveal themselves in the stream of consciousness because we are reason machines; we need a reason for everything we either do or what happens to us. Recognizing that the self is a myth means breaking down the presupposition of identical phenomena where the self appears continuous. But there is a deeper way of regarding identity. If we were to refuse to view reality as a solid object, something empiricists need to interpret their sense data, which means that they really cannot perform their experiments without the assumption that causes necessarily precede effects, for without this presumption, they really cannot be empiricists. So, the scientific system of understanding takes over notions of common sense reality since the reason machine will simply make anomalies fit their picture of the world. We have all had the experience of doing or saying things we didn't really mean and despite the fact that we did really mean it doesn't penetrate. We just consider it a mistake, when the incident is really helping us to see the truth about our inner selves.

The confusion of our identities with stable components makes the idea of a self problematic. With common sense notions of reality dominating the perceptual sphere, what actually lies underneath is not really explored. If I have a hard time with determining the boundaries around my own self, then how am I to assess the status of

someone else's identity? Is the distance between myself as a moral person and the person who has no morality really the gulf I take it to be?

In quantum physics, particles are said to be entangled, making them inextricably linked to a common bond. The macro level may reveal its similarities with the idea of identity. We may be linked to other people in a way that is not obvious on the face of it, but the ability to merge with another person's idea of himself often occurs when we discover ideals in common with them, something that reveals the presence of doppelgangers or people who are so close to our own sense of ourselves that we process the similarities with them more than the differences. The individual who protects his identity with a shield of impenetrable qualities may not realize that his sense of himself is colliding with quantum rules in a way that merges the shield with an unprotected boundary, an irresistible pull in the direction of sameness. The amoral individual is simply doing what he thinks satisfies his desires in isolation of others' impingements, but the joint that fuses together his own identity with the moral person's is the fact of their both being beings who inhabit an absurd world. If the world were truly as reasonable as the moral person assumes, then the evildoers would develop sharp distinctions between him and others, but the absurdity lies in the inability to make a distinction that holds in every instance of an encounter. Evil is not the opposite of good, but rather an adjunct to it since good and evil need each other in an odd sort of way. Kafka understood this when his character in *The Trial* was unable to discover the motivation for his conviction and follows a course of action that inevitably leads to his doom despite the presence of a real sense of justice never emerging. Kafkaesque depictions of the world often contain this moment of recognition, as in "The Hunger Artist," the man who starves himself is living

off the sustenance of it being public, and the viewers are satisfied with something the artist can never have, and that is satiation. The absurdity of the artist's condition is unrecognizable to the public because, as Foucault points out, the notion of the gaze, or the perception we have of art really becomes a mirror between the viewer and viewed. And in this locking of seemingly indifferent perspectives, the individual is subjected to an invasion of unwanted concatenations that reverberate in the social space where identities are taken for granted without the knowledge that an absurd reality has taken hold, one in which reason making fails because access to a real token of meaning is withheld by the very thing that would confer it. Thus, realities that we might say are incomplete because they don't coalesce into a real whole, burden the individual with a metonym incompletely referring to something that doesn't construct parts, but only displays them in a dazzling confirmation of an existence that languishes under the doubling of the Real.

Conflating reason with the unreasonable is the project of the absurd and teaches the inhabitants of amoral society that there is no such thing as acting in isolation since the movements of a butterfly can bring down a plane in Pennsylvania. The interconnectedness of all does not seem readily apparent perhaps because we are used to the solitary quality of our minds. We seem to think that private access equals absolute privacy, that no one can ever know the contents of my consciousness unless I decide to reveal it. But this notion operates on the assumption that the world is constructed to build human machines that do things and experience things as if we were discrete parts that only join into fully operative wholes in societal interactions. But the amoral quality of the world is revealed in the indifference that the world has to our best laid plans. God could have decided to create beings who could choose between right and wrong but

nevertheless always choose to do the right thing, but this was not the case. To hark back to our suicide bomber, the world is a place where cruelty is the rule. Christians call this state of affairs the fall that happened after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, but God was cruel to make their progeny so imperfect that the first murder happened when Cain killed his brother apparently for the crime of being favored. The fallen nature of the world, then, is all about pitting neighbor against neighbor, and even intimates that animals must eat each other because they too are driven by divine imperatives. What God actually did was make the world so inhospitable that a reasonable person could go mad just by contemplating the chaos God plunged us into. If there were a loving God, he refuses to manifest it in nature, so we follow an absurd program like in Camus' novel *The Stranger* where the protagonist simply kills an Arab because he is hot. He is not a stranger, he is estranged from common sense morality, something that makes his trial not a discussion of his crimes but an indictment of his personality. An estranged person is one who can find no home in moral society, so he acts as if motives for action were just physical attainers that makes crime an automated decision the hostile environment of the world agrees to with the possibility of the crime's commission being allowed to happen at all.

We have a situation where we have to live with the estranged, those who really have no good motives for their actions, but do them anyway either because they don't care about or aren't aware of the consequences of their actions. We look at the people locked into poverty, having to turn to drug distribution or other forms of criminal activity because they don't have other legitimate avenues to express their need for being an individual in the world who has projects and plans to pursue. Poverty is really a difficult

issue because there is a stigma attached to it, as if they somehow merited their situation because of some lack in their personalities. Ghettos populate society with their similarity to a prison. Black males have a life expectancy of forty-two years because they have better odds of being shot than going to college. Our prisons are filled with African Americans because they have turned to a life of crime that, contrary to common opinion, they enter into as a warehousing of those who couldn't express their rage against society except as a lapse into the gangster lifestyle. Rap music gained an ugly face when it started calling itself gangsta rap and the objectification of the female body and the glorification of a gangster lifestyle make them seem like candidates for the prison system, sometimes worn as a badge of honor; legitimizing their street credit. When it turned out that the white rapper Vanilla Ice really came from a suburb in Texas, pretenders to the rappers' world were viciously attacked. It seemed that African Americans wanted rap music to be a signifier of their own unique form of cultural expression, just as break dancing began in the ghettos and then mainstreamed as a form of dance that everyone could engage in as blacks increasingly began to be perceived as cornering the market on hip. In the eighties, when rap was first finding its sea legs, there was a group called "Public Enemy" who laced their lyrics with socially conscious expressions and even wore uniforms of a sort, almost as if they were following the model the Black Panthers had laid down. When exactly rap music began to lose its sense of itself as a uniquely cultural expression and turned to the more degenerate form it now occupies is hard to pin down, but surely money was part of the motive because degrading it only fed into the pornographic model of most pop music that makes its mark by being "dirty."

With the clash of values between the economically oppressed and the white people who huddle in their suburbs out of fear of a home invasion, the more salacious cases of which affect a whole country, like when Dr. Petit, from Connecticut, escaped two men who raped and killed his family, an event that received such national attention perhaps because they were just law abiding citizens, but perhaps there is this dark motive for making the evening news and that is because they were white. At least their attackers weren't black; that would have only heaped more unwarranted scorn on a community because the racial divide, sorry to say, is still there. The news, it should be said, is wholly nihilistic on its own, since the motive for the stories they choose to cover seem to be ones that carry a feeling of fear with them. What we have is a society infatuated with crime, as we can see in the popularity of the "CSI" shows because all entertainment has an element of pornography in it. The torture porn of some horror movies gets a lot of attention, but the action movie is no less immoral because the violence so off-handedly displayed puts them in the same category as *Deep Throat* where the sex might be missing but the point of arousal is not. The *Die Hard* movies especially feed this need for sexually gratifying violence, like in the first one where they try to make it as bloody as possible when Bruce Willis' character has to run across broken glass, and in the latest one, he actually shoots himself in the shoulder in order to kill the man holding him hostage. As long as our forms of entertainment resemble flights into fantasiacal morality tales that get to their point through very savage depictions, and the sad old formulas always crop up with the bad guy getting his comeuppance in the end; it seems like creativity stops, and the simple-minded plots that proliferate in theaters like unwelcome and bad smelling roses make entertainment a kind of agent orange affecting us with a

drug-addled fake reality where, also, the case can be made that most movies are science fiction because what they ask us to believe borders on the impossible.

So are we in the process of making our world into a gangster's paradise because we seem so wedded to a view of the world as a place where violence and malevolence are the norm rather than the exception? There doesn't seem to be much rage against the amoral society we are damning ourselves to perhaps because we have grown comfortable with our facile reading of society as a place where violence and savagery remain the rule because of the religious view that this is a fallen world and so everything in it must be somewhat degraded. We refuse to see ourselves as fully human because actual humanity was only found in the Garden of Eden and once the repulsion happened, we were required to accept ourselves as existing in an already damned condition; hence the need for a savior. But it seems to be the case that this earth, our existence, is already a form of damnation. There was a science fiction story where a man wakes up and finds that he is nude and can find no clothes. He walks out of his house and sees other naked people wandering around, and he realizes he feels no sexual arousal. The conclusion he and his neighbors come to is that their world has become hell, and they recognize their damned condition without the ability to turn on to the sight of a naked body. Levinas' wrote about a kind of decent nudity where we stand before God stripped of our human accoutrements and face Him with a self donned only in flesh. But who can believe in the Special Creation of Man theory when our world is so apposite from a religionist's idea of what the world should be like? Are we not just animals who can think and speak and have opposable thumbs, all things that make us different from "lower" animals, but the similarities between ourselves and them creates an us versus them mentality that really

gets perpetuated in the rhetoric of American politics where the left and right seem to enjoy a special kind of rift, and that is the inability to cross ideological divides. The things that make us higher than a cat or a dog are the very things that place us on the same moral plane as them. We don't seem to care about conflict resolution as much as we do about conflict perpetuation since the point of a debate is not a healthy exchange of ideas but a sexy, throbbing phallus feeding the desire to for an excision of morality so we can be free to hedonistically support our lifestyles with a blind eye to the pressing problems of the world so long as we can feel aroused by the satiation of victory. The famous picture of the sailor kissing a girl upon his return from the war (WWII), symbolizes that indefinable pairing between violence and sexual love that exists in its battered state because it is still a patriarchal society we live in and the nurturers get remanded to a minor position since no one wants to hear that society itself needs a huge make-over to be a good society. As things stand now, we cannot say that we live in a good society because the forces of evil are not the Muslims on the other side of the world, but the petty differences we carefully grow into giant rifts that we make enormous through the prurient incursions into stridency.

Our whole society is based on a kind of subterranean sexuality as we are the New Victorians as Foucault once said, hoping to suppress that which will come out through the crags of thought and desire that, in its oppression, slips through these cracks and suddenly morality has become amoral since the expression of sex is embedded in every aspect of our society. Suppression is one of the strongest human desires and will tend to have this effect. Our world is the implantation of the perverse (Foucault again) where power relations arrange into discourses that will have the affect of displaying rather than

suppressing sexuality. Power will always have its restrictive effects, but we can negotiate through its heinous expressions by embracing the truth of our lives; that we are sexual beings who need to form a better society not by the obfuscation of sexual discourses but through inculcating them in a way that makes us freer. This kind of freedom would reconcile the feminists to the conservatives and the African Americans to a truer sense of their own identity, thus making society less about factionalizing and more about concurring with the highest good we can form. Until then, we must exist in our gangster's paradise and realize the mirrors we come across aren't accurate representations of ourselves but, rather, the nude body shimmering from the water of the shower connecting our exposed genitals to the whole of civilization who all hide beneath their clothes the celebratory essence of themselves, and that is that if we were to ever escape our gangster's paradise, it would be by a recognition of ourselves as plenipotentiary beings whose sexual power need not be interrogated as something "dirty" but a reveling in the human body without which we would just be wandering spirits with no idea of human experience and the full glory of being a fully human, fully sexual individual.

The Invention of Reason

Books ruined the Scholastics in the Middle Ages. The nod toward scientific experimentation, which started with Galileo and Newton, dropped into a netherworld where knowledge could only be read and disseminated by monks who, in realizing the rest of society probably couldn't read, made themselves the keepers of literacy and buried in a tide of books, they just clung to their Aristotle and theologized with a form of reasoning that necessarily excluded science. Meanwhile, in the eastern part of the world, Islam was producing great works, with people like Avicenna and Averroes writing brilliant pieces of philosophy and using the library in Alexandria to preserve the world's great thinkers from ending up in a book burning session. Banned books would leave the church clueless about anti-religious rhetoric. People were probably thinking the world sat on the back of a turtle, which in turn, sat on the back of another turtle, as it's turtles all the way down.

By 1855, a book appeared titled *Alice in Wonderland*. While not directly addressing a religious theme, the people Alice encounters are so satirically displayed that, in a poem, "Jabberwocky," the element of satire on sense making so central to theistic

reasoning makes the first stanza of the poem a brilliant indictment of the role of logic in western society. The Aristotelian skew in Scholastic writing turns upside down in what would surely be blasphemy to them, while perplexed, if they could read this first stanza displayed thus:

Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe

would surely think that the devil made the writer do it.

Should a religionist become exposed to this nonsense, they would be unable to apprehend the point of it as a word salad, perhaps, but Carroll means to slap the carapaces of our turtles to motivate them to move out of the way of Columbus, like a knight of the round table in Merlinesque Carrolese, damning our explorer, turtles and all, to the hopeless delusion of roundness when we already know it is just a flat plate God, in his wisdom, using the inchoate language of nature to tease us into thinking in canonical realities when the truth remains somewhere in the brain of our top turtle, the one in charge of balancing.

Since the point of reasoning was to find God in back of the premises and conclusions, we had people speculating uselessly in arguments vacillating between God the supernatural resident in an Olympus-like setting and God the supernal mind only a spirit, a ghost haunting absent mindedly like a professor specializing in the subject of the universe who is always misplacing his keys. God isn't something physical. He is simple, meaning he has no body, no emotions, no recognizably human attributes because our complexity makes us creature, whereas God is the divine. This was the attitude of

Augustine at least who gave us the concept of original sin, meaning that we are all born with Adam's transgression still operative in our existences because it only seemed logical to the church fathers that sin is so universal that we can trace our own sinful tendencies all the way back to the first sin ever committed. Despite the fact that this seems like a mental heuristic meant to imprison the individual in the creaturely world so completely, the realization hits that we can never escape sin, even as babies. We come into the world and with our first cry, bring ruin on ourselves. The fact that the Catholics want to universalize sin in this way, the inescapable condition of humankind, means they take a dim view of any attempt to reason our way out of the giant cage that the world is. We would have to find a way to escape the clutches of theistic reasoning, which is paradoxically, unreason, or the sense that irrational belief is not only proper reasoning, but the only kind of reasoning there is in the world. During the Age of Reason toward the end of the Middle Ages, coming about in the latter part of the seventeenth century, suddenly western philosophers found their voice and began spinning theories that would inevitably get them into trouble with their own churches. While Descartes was waiting to publish his *Meditations*, he grew very concerned that the church would be bothered enough by his notions to take some punitive action, and one of his contemporaries, Spinoza, would be excommunicated from his Jewish synagogue with his philosophical speculations. Both philosophers had contextualized God in a way that hadn't been seen before. While Descartes preserved the idea of God as the greatest perfection in the human mind, he complicated things with his principle of fundamental doubt, where reality could not be judged on its face but must take into account the possibility of an evil genius in back of our reasoning controlling us like mechanical puppets. It would only be

through reducing arguments down to their most basic elements that we could have certainty on anything about the outside world through clear and distinct ideas. He proposed that the evil genius could not make us think. Therefore, I am because I can think. But getting out of the mind without the evil genius following would remain a problematic in an argument that many see as circular, meaning the more one tries to get away from his mind, he can't because the only thing that allows him to get out is the very thing that frees him from the evil genius, and with his reductionist technique, we really have no way to get out of our heads without the evil genius noticing. His philosophy was really less about God then it was about the art of pure reasoning, and it was this implication that made him fear the church.

Spinoza's contravention of his religious intuitions was even more radical. He proposed that everything was one substance, therefore he was a monist in contrast to Descartes who was a dualist, and God was simply everywhere since the ground of everything, absolutely everything including God originated in and supported by this substance. Human beings were only modes of this substance, and couldn't escape the implication that they were never free of it; they are made from it and must submit all their actions in conformity with it. This soft determinism came to be interpreted as an assault on religious reasoning because, as we have discussed, theistic reasoning wants to find meaning in the bosom of God, and if God is actually a substance that everything is made of, and then the distinction between God and creature breaks down. The attempts at adding purity to logic only lock us into a puny body ravaged by the rape of angels unable to tame their libidos at we, beautiful mechanisms of God, spitting out ejaculated word forms touching the breasts of the hidden female deity who only wishes to eat our

children. This is the myth of Lilith who is mentioned in Genesis when, surprisingly, the writer mentions the creation of man *and* woman occurring at the same time, suggesting that Adam actually had a first wife. The myth of Lilith produced a story that Adam's first wife only wanted to be on top during sex, and since Adam didn't like this, the story eventually has her turning into a Succubus, hovering around birth events where the general belief was that she meant to kill the child. Today, they host fairs named the Lilith Fair in honor of the first woman who would not be tamed.

The skewed view of authority by the church was a form of mind control. Just in this obvious fact that there are actually two writers of Genesis, J and P, producing completely different narratives, shows ignorance, revealing the struggle theologians had over deciding on the actual time periods the seven days represent. This struggle is so useless since the obvious attempt to circumvent science dissolves the speculations in a froth on a beer mug where the taste of bitterness bitterly repels the stupidity of trying to assign every mystery a slogan like an advertising button they wear unaware that they mostly participate in a politics of dunces and accomplish nothing at all.

Then in the 19th century, we had perhaps one of the hardest philosophers to understand and that was Kierkegaard. I don't think anyone who hasn't read him in the original Danish can truly identify all the concepts he wove together since he used so many circumlocutions and acoustical effects that puzzling out his philosophy in English is like trying to wrest blood from a stone. He felt comfortable using paradoxes and irony to move his ideas forward in something he called the indirect communication. He cloaked his philosophy so well in this method that he never imperiled his career as a staunch Lutheran. But unfortunately for him, cartoons appeared in the newspaper. They

were caricatures showing him in the black clothes he always wore, and sporting a hump on his back making him look like some kind of executioner's camel. Before the cartoons appeared, he had taken to walking through the streets of Copenhagen to get away from his heavy mind. But, the cartoons were so hilariously portrayed that a phenomenon known as the Copenhagen laugh attached to him. At this period of time in Denmark, the community was rather tight knit and once one experienced the Copenhagen laugh, they forever existed in a state of ridicule, unable to be removed, an eternal stigma following the labeled person to his grave. Now he had to give up on his walks as people would simply point at him and laugh. And since people were unable to reinstate him to his former reputation of respect, Kierkegaard's writing life suffered. Not to mention the fact of his dense and startlingly complex narratives, he would write most of his books under pseudonyms not because he wanted to hide his identity, but because, with each new name, he felt freer to assume different personas in the delivery of his philosophy. And yet he remained a strong believer in God, so much so that those attending his deathbed reported seeing a kind of light, a heavenly glow, coming from his face. He evidently died a happy man.

In his philosophy, he seemed to think that being a Christian was accepting the irrational aspects of the desire for faith and make oneself one with God through ascending different stages we encounter along the path of life. He wanted people to be in the ethical stage, the highest one, but getting away from the aesthetic stage is difficult because we want to experience the beauty of the world and art, etc. His was a teleology of finding the best mode of meaning in life. For example, he wrote about Abraham's insane attempt to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as an act that can never really be understood

through normal human understanding, so the Christian simply needed to become a knight of faith, where the improbable propositions of Christianity get swallowed up in the implementation of “the task.” We struggle through our complications as embodied beings by doing things that will release some of the anxiety about being an individual, an idea he thought was very hard and that few people will ever be able to reject the quantitative realm to accomplish the position of individuality. People want to gather in mass expressions of their faith but the idea of the knight of faith means that the Christian will be forever misunderstood and this is even a desirable position because being an individual means that the path to God, the accomplishment of the task, is the best way to allay anxieties about the status of one’s soul.

John Donne, a 17th century poet, would also seem confusing because he used paradoxes as well, and he was as devout as Kierkegaard, as can be seen in his holy sonnets and his leadership position as a preacher in his church. But he was a mannerist, which means he would yoke together opposite concepts like virtue and degeneracy, good and bad, etc. to express a kind of poetry that would vex the reader with little puzzles they would have to interpret in poetic figures he wanted to use as a way of achieving a kind of quiescence where the individual would feel the full weight of religious understandings. For example, he would write, “batter my heart ye three-personed God,” a move meant to show that the implications of the Trinity was to wreak a kind of violence on people. Getting to God, for Donne, was about culling through intuitions about theism in order to live in that lower Kierkegaardian life of the aesthetic.

The appreciation of art sometimes has ethical implications because living a virtuous life is a kind of aesthetic. Religion is less about praying for things we can

probably never have, and more about appreciating the beauty of the world as a mirror of God's love. So, if Kierkegaard kind of gets the aesthetic mode and the ethical mode in superposition, it is through this combinatory tendency of the two ways of life meeting in a kind of synthesis that somewhat contradicts his earlier evocation to live in the ethical mode. But perhaps there is the tinge of the mystic in Kierkegaard, as he traveled the razor's edge in life not looking for that absent canonical reality, but trying, or even forcing, people to deal with difficulty through difficult language, something not unusual for a mystic to do. So even though Kierkegaard and Donne were fully religious, they were expressing a kind of reasoning that would release us from our ordinarily bounded minds with a challenge to the reader to reject facile readings for the difficult challenge of finding meaning in a God who might turn out to be an impostor because we might not be able to tell the difference between a God who wishes to lacerate us or to shower blessings on the actively ardent individual.

The idea of the individual is a recent invention. Now, we take it for granted that everyone is separate from man in the mass, but this hasn't always been so. Reasoning about the individual in isolation from the society he belongs to have pressured thinkers to make sense of this new and improbable thing singular and separate from the ideologies that imprison him. People weren't thinking about democratic forms of government until John Locke ventured to write about the social contract. Suddenly, it seemed possible to treat everyone as an entity unto himself. Getting away from God never seemed easier if we just placed the individual in a position to choose for himself what path he would take. In fact, there were many thinkers who worried about democracies because of the

possibility of mob rule and that the government they get would not represent the will of the people. The individual versus the group became an item of concern.

The fact that philosophers were talking about God even less and less, and we have the death of God in Nietzsche's statement that God is dead, and suddenly we have a society that hallows freedom from religious restraints; we are really empowered to act as we wish, something he called the will to power. His *ubermensch* was the self-empowered individual who would activate his intentions with the probity of a God. In Nietzsche, we not only have the absence of God, but man acting in place of God, a displacement that frees him from the silly impositions of people who see themselves as moral agents but, since every reward is future for them, sink into a vacuum of possibilities filled with the choral strains of their slavishness to a false ideology.

The slow march of philosophy through the ages eventually terminated in the academies where academicians plow through the ancient questions and add their own modern twists, but people aren't really paying attention to them anymore to tell them what it means to live a good life. Much to Nietzsche's chagrin, people still clung to their religious beliefs, and making meaning in life was still a project of conforming to an ideology. But then something original happened. A discipline separated from philosophy and distinguished itself as a separate thing, a science. This new thing was called psychology. Suddenly, the idea of the individual as a fully developed entity entered in as something psychologists could mold to fit their own particular school. The rise of the therapist placed the individual in the very center of the process of making meaning. People usually went to see them if they were having problems they couldn't work out on their own. But they could be assured that in this therapeutic process, they

could be as self-centered as they wanted to be because it was the therapist's task to listen. The fact that psychology would make the individual the center of observation meant that the individual had suddenly reached a pinnacle of regard. Perhaps they had their religions too, but it was in the eyes of the psychologist that the uniqueness of the individual was assured.

Wanting to be unique suddenly became a real desire. The downside to this approach is making people narcissistic, something Christopher Lasch would write a whole book on the implications of having a society of narcissists since it would be the satiation of individual desire formed in a furnace of hedonistic pursuits and commodified personalities that only want instant gratification. People would rather save for a flat screen TV or an iPad than save their money as a way of spreading the wealth, or in other words, think of money not as a vehicle for material appeasement but as a tool for improving their own and especially other people's lives. Money should not be seen as a marker for the flaunting of wealth, but try to resist Mammon, where the real need of fiscal responsibility actually reverses itself as a rupture into a moment of social change where money becomes so unimportant that it eventually falls into obsolescence.

The various schools of psychology probably unintentionally promote this danger of a fall into narcissism, but then again, they still seem afflicted by the need to view their patients as little mechanisms since their focus grows more and more trained on a regard of themselves as a "hard" science. Given Freud, we even have to wonder if this desire actually turns into a hard on and the erotica of a counter transference experience plants a phallus right down in the place between where the therapist sits and the patient patiently hopes this sexualization, now a fantasy, actually turns into a real affair. There was a

movie starring Barbara Streisand, called *The Prince of Tides*, playing a therapist with a male patient. She attended each and every session with a skirt that barely covered her underwear and the blouse had a plunging neckline that only left a little to the imagination. Even though the patient was deeply troubled by childhood sexual abuse, the level of erotic tension rose and rose in each scene showing the therapy sessions. It needs not even bear stating that the two became sexually involved and this crossing of a serious boundary is treated in the movie as something perfectly normal, as if every therapist should sleep with her patient, almost introducing a new norm. An early psychologist named Otto Frank regularly slept with his patients until the psychological community couldn't take it anymore and handed down punishments. Certainly there are sex therapists frowned on by leftover Victorian attitudes, but their centralizing of sex turns out to be a much more honest approach over the mainstream therapists who toy with these sexual emotions inevitably arising in their sessions and just letting them lie there, giving their patient a new and manufactured problem into their already neurotic minds.

The peculiarity of sex started with Freud perhaps, but was taken up as a serious subject by Foucault later in the century. Foucault's argument wasn't really about the pervasiveness of sexual impulses, but about the way that power discourses emerge with specialized languages that indirectly refer to the perverse and leaves the individual wondering about just how deeply this interaction between sex and power goes. We can see Foucault's true concerns in his *Uses of Pleasure*, where he spends a whole chapter on the dangers of a ruler's absolute control over his subjects' bodies. Echoing Thoreau writing a century earlier, people simply blindly "follow the leader" to such an extent that soldiers gladly go die in wars that they absolutely have no investment in. According to

Foucault, death is more or less a tool the ruler uses as a veil over the eyes of his subjects, and in this recognition, the exercise of arbitrary power interacts with the various power discourses in a way that is ultimately suppressive. It can be something of a puzzle when the reader reaches this last chapter on the ruler when the entire previous chapters so heavily focus on sex. But what is exposed with Foucault's choice of ending is the actual, perhaps hidden, intention of his argument. It can be noticed that in the earlier chapters, he spends a lot of time on the issue of power itself to the extent of describing very specific kinds of methods that are then implemented in what power discourses actually aim at, leaving the ultimate intent of this specificity somewhat vague. Even in his use of the word "truth" where, in some places, he uses quite often without directly informing the reader what he means by truth. He simply says that the individual in society learns about the truth of himself in his sexual peculiarity. This reticence to openly discuss what he means by truth but then throwing in its connection with sex remains, it seems to me, an intentional technique to foster confusion. Foucault is ultimately after prompting thoughts about his evasion to veer in a particular direction. Once the last chapter is encountered, what we understand is that the entire work has been a critique of morality with the suggestion that there really is nothing the individual can do with what ends up being a theoretical if not ambiguous dig at the notion of power as capable of accomplishing anything at all. We are sexual beings, yes, he says. We are subjected to the application of arbitrary power, yes, he says. But the open question is, what do we do about it to which the answer is practically nothing.

Here we have to address, in extending out Foucault's argument, the feelings of powerlessness that almost everyone in society feels in our current century. It is obvious

that government is broken, has been actually for a very long time, but with recent developments, we are beginning to see the inadequacy of democracy. Budget discussions that almost fail in the frightening prospect of a paralyzed bureaucracy that would create tidal waves of panic should this paralysis not unvex itself. The fact of the matter is, people in our current century were beginning to view themselves as mere cogs in a machine, producing responses like, "It's not my problem." This isn't necessarily a marker of a total loss of compassion, but rather, a speech act coming from a newly adumbrating reality. This reality began its manifestations a century ago as the Industrial Revolution began. Now all of society was enamored of machines. This fascination is still with us today in the desire of some scientists to produce machine intelligence known as AI. A test was even invented by Alan Turing the intention of which was to program responses into the AI and have a human judge there to see if the judge fails to distinguish between human reasoning and machine reasoning. No AI has ever passed this test.

The focus on mechanical perspectives is so pervasive that the explosion of technological advancements almost seems like a kind of magic. In fact, many thinkers think we are entering another Magical Age.

The consequences for reasoning was a fracturing of disparate parts that only seem to join into a whole because the sense of powerlessness that exists in society now makes us perpetually conflicted. Bureaucracies pressure the individual into a kind of groupthink; perform for the company or be shown the door. So to have power in society means that one has to forego one's ethical tendencies and conform to a pattern of living where work is the real operator and everything that happens outside of it is just a quick march into the next workday. Family values, which is the mantra for the conservative

Christians, problematizes over the apparent focus on making money. What people will do just for a little bit of money is stranger than fiction, since the desire for its accumulation makes society unrecognizable except as a slot machine dispensing its rewards to the resolute soldier willing to log his hours as if a punch card were a divine checklist that could not be escaped.

The sense of powerlessness that individual's were experiencing did not necessarily reduce their sense of themselves as unique, but it did create a tension between being a unique individual and one dedicated to fulfilling work expectations in a way that would diminish the understanding of oneself as an autonomous human being and raise the specter of simply being like everyone else, both desired from the point of view of living in a society that supported grouping and wanted nothing more than to pursue their ends with the pleasure they seek when they are not acting like robots at work. Powerlessness became so pervasive, however, that acting with autonomy came to be seen as an increasingly unlikely proposition. What I propose next is a prescription for reengaging individualism as a project even with the constraints of powerlessness, and a mode of reasoning that has to be invented in order for people to free themselves from ideological impediments.

Rugged individualism was one of the ideals we find in the popular mind in the latter part of the 19th century, which was something that meant acting with autonomy and required a toughness of mind in order to meet life's challenges. Acting with a sense of being alone in the world, since most were just locked into a group mentality, was increasingly perceived as a lesser program of living than the individualists valued. With Henry David Thoreau, we had a period of time where he completely abandoned

civilization, preferring instead to live the simple life at a place called Walden Pond. Here he recounts his experiences living in isolation, something that was less a moral quest than a way to test the waters of individualism. He proved uniqueness to be a value that could be striven for in a situation of abstention from the accoutrements of civilization.

Uniqueness as a value then became a model for others to probe the innermost recesses of their minds. But people increasingly believing that there was a location for the soul within the confines of their own body which produced a desire to gather with like minded individuals in a way that would press home the point of being in the right group as opposed to wrong groups which were demonized as false expressions of natural religion. The Second Great Awakening that happened in the beginning of the 19th century raised religion in the popular mind as an *indispensable* value, a movement that made belief into a compulsory choice. With these two competing values, being in the right religion and being an individual, reasoning on the proper way to live suffered the consequences of what was considered the greater good, man in the mass or man in an isolated position. It was in resistance to this mob mentality model that made Thoreau want to join the individualists, and in the very coining of the term, “rugged individualism,” we seemed to have a conflict between joiners and resisters. Thoreau would later write on the merits of civil disobedience since the power structures needed humbling. Certainly minority populations like the Chinese and African Americans would like to see the prejudice against them lessen, but there was no room for a revolution in a democracy that was guarded by laws, things necessarily made by white men. Plurality in society was merely tolerated and not seen as a virtue in itself. Although the American ideal was about making opportunities for everyone, it wouldn’t be until 1964 that blacks would get the

monkey off their back about being denied full membership in traditionally white society, and the jury is still out on the status of Asians what with the internment of Japanese citizens during WWII, and the fact that Asian faces are never seen on American television screens (the popular series, “Kung Fu,” had a white man playing a Chinese man), and it seemed that plurality was increasingly being devalued. The consequence of this was not a fall into individualism, however, because the thing that would make it possible was being defeated on every side by the need to gather.

The industrial revolution, which also started in the 19th century, drove people into the cities and was promptly taken advantage of by the capitalists. Muckrakers such as Sinclair Lewis tried to expose the dehumanizing elements of this drive to have a labor force who would work in damnable conditions and work for pennies all carefully overseen by the bosses who benefitted from this almost slave labor, and suddenly society was seeing a great divide between the haves and have-nots. This situation was exacerbated even more by the 1980’s, where more millionaires were created than at any other time in American history, but the gap between rich and poor became impossibly wide. We have still yet to close the gap. The Great Depression during the 1930’s illuminated a great social problem that has never been addressed. When the government implements impotent policies, the need to rebel, and people often carried placards with the words “In Hoover we’re busted,” the sense of empowerment created by protests quickly fades under the realization of complete dependency on the government since the people solving the problem by themselves is completely impossible. It would really be WWII that would rescue the populace when people, mainly women, came into the workforce while more than a million men died on battlefields in the Pacific and Europe.

It is a sad truth that wars benefit society. After WWII, though, we had soldiers dying in battlefields that were remote from American interests such as the Vietnam War where the fear was a domino effect of communism taking over Southeast Asia, and now the wars in the Middle East that come to resemble vendettas against the fall of the twin towers. It seemed that modern warfare was more ideological than necessary, and the result is support the war and be labeled a patriot with groups carrying a condemnation of those who don't share the sentiment, or the resisters who often ran to Canada to avoid the draft, or else became conscientious objectors who were privately reviled as cowards.

Grouping people is not just seen in the various ways wars force people into groups, but grouping is an accident of the human condition. To resist society labels one a Luddite, if one sees technology as particularly damaging, or the hippie movement of the 1960's that had some disastrous results when they left society without the proper training in how to live in communes where diseases spread and some of them actually died or grew very sick.

In our current society, we have a situation where this feeling of powerlessness has hold of us because of the bureaucratic restraints I wrote about above. What we need is an invention of reason that empowers the powerless and gives us what is sorely lacking in society, and that is the return to uniqueness and individualism as *values*.

With so many ways to be wrong about a particular method of reasoning, and the cognoscenti will act as the vanguard for the proper use of it, coming to a consensus on what qualifies as proper usage remains difficult. The silliness of analytic philosophy lies in its dedication to formal rhetoric, remanding any creative approach to philosophizing it to a risible position. The rational program has many faults since it will disregard

important additions if they fail the litmus test of the reasoner, but it is important to remember that there are just as many ways to be right about a method as wrong. The important thing to remember is that the way we use reasons to fill us in on the importance on the kind of values I am proposing here, uniqueness and individualism, has a postmodern tinge to it since the ways of the past, which I have discussed at length, need revivifying in a potent way.

Jacques Derrida, whatever we think of his position as a kind of literary terrorist, nevertheless helped show how the individual tends to have a temporary existence as additions to his identity happen in timed deferrals; the individual isn't always as fully aware of himself as an individual until he has confronted himself in the complexities of his differences from and similarities to the identity he wishes to have clarity on. The fact is, he becomes de-centered since his pre-eminent place in society is not at the center of the sum total of all his hopes and fears, but somewhere in a universal impulse to be, and he cannot accomplish this until he realizes that he must come to a radical acceptance of himself, meaning that he has to be willing to live in this particular state of powerlessness he finds himself in and embrace it as the de-centering element that removes him from a position of imprisonment in his self and find a way to promote his sense of importance in a different way.

But the de-centering of the individual would lead to a situation of freeplay, a state where the concepts would flow back and forth through the mind without really latching on to one single idea but allow the forces of self-absorption, which can be an unfortunate side affect of therapy, disappear in the death of the "I." What this means is that the "I" that usually occupies our attention really sinks into a bog where, in finding a new form of

mortality, turns its attention to a kind of identity where the individual must confront the consequences of an absence. There is nothing to fill in this hole in the human being, but one of the consequences is excising the idea of a soul while the human being teases out its new set of anxieties. The modern world assures us that there will always be conflicts between society and the individual since it is in the chaos of the pull and tug of competing life situations that the individual struggles. Postmodern philosophy isn't really arguing away the concretized identity, but simply wants to keep it in flux, a position where the motives and aspirations of a human being face a world that is hostile to it, and in an attempt to adjust, we just peel away the parts of the identity that aren't necessary to think about. The de-centered individual is the individual who knows he has anxieties that heighten with novelty, but he has prepared himself with a mind that is ineluctably open. Since his set of anxieties are ones which occur in opposition to an illusory stability, he is freer to face the larger questions of life with a kind of reasoning that does not seek God but the Good. The Good is an idea that philosophers since Plato have been trying to define, and definitions are not readily forthcoming. But we can say that within the rubric of what it means to an *individual* to appropriate the Good, we could say that, with our postmodern sense of the displaced and de-centralized "I," the highest level of achievement is the desire to find a meaning in life that does not facilely feed the individual answers that are easily falsifiable but takes on the reasons for living a life with meaning as the greatest good.

Having humility means that one subjects oneself to the aesthetic beauties that surround them. Humility should not mean self-abasement. But religions seem to use this idea of humility as a form of keeping their people in thrall to this false version. So, one

factor in our invention of reason should contain the idea that religion isn't the sole province of making meaning because theistic reasoning is so weighted down with these false beliefs about the nature of reality and the role of the human individual in the religious universe. As much as they talk about the individual finding his own route to salvation, they are really more invested in keeping the individual from thinking for himself too much. They haven't moved from the Middle Ages that much since the idea is to make everyone think the same thing.

Using reason to find a meaning in life that does not rely on theistic versions was first attempted by the existentialists who decided that the set of anxieties for the individual were such that they had to maneuver through the morass of a hostile world. Rousseau wrote in his *Pensees* that human beings are the only beings capable of being self-aware enough to know that they are suffering unlike the lower animals. The individual is unique in his position in nature as capable of reasoning about his life, something that placed the individual in nature as a rational actor who has reasoning ability particularly because it makes them process rationality as a thing that will place him in a universe that does not necessarily need a God in their hypothesis. Sartre recognized the pattern of actions an individual can perform in order to get him to realize his absolute freedom, and in this radical autonomy realize himself as capable of anything his will proposes.

Interaction with other human beings was something called intersubjectivity, a way of being in the world where all conscious minds can share things in common and in this position create a community that individuals can interact with each other as subjects communicating with subjects instead of viewing others as ultimately different from them.

The idea of difference has had a long history of shortchanging interactions because individuals were committed to valuing themselves over others, and the other individual became Other, that which cannot be regarded except the gulf that separates them continues to operate in an obfuscating manner.

So, we can say as we continue to invent reason, that the Good that people seek is actually a method for finding meaning. Inasmuch this is a hard project to undertake, we can say that people need to be free to pursue their ends. Rationality isn't the desire to make a science, but a way of rationality to connect the individual to his own innermost longings with the society in which he has to move. Ethical behavior needs to be in the forefront of the project, but saying that the Good is some indefinable property means that we have to alter it to fit a larger and more inclusive picture of the world. It is a world of beauty and cruelty, a world that tries to make everyone into myrmidons of state supported structures, while contributing to the sense of powerlessness they feel, a world where the idea of the individual is under assault by theistic reasoning. We must say that the ultimate freedom of the individual combines with the breakdown of difference as a barrier to interaction so that people will have to alter their sense of themselves in order to be rational actors who can't help but seek meaning.

What is meaning then if we take away the theistic program where comfort is gained through the idea that meaning comes from conforming to the religious ideology to which they subscribe? It is the idea that individuals can pursue their own sense of the Good through seeking a pattern in life that will confer a sense of quiescence, a form of quietude where their anxieties can be allayed. This will necessarily require a form of introspection where individuals, as ends in themselves, can decide to either accept or

reject novel forms of experience as either contributing to or detracting from their own sense of what the world is like. Therefore, individuals must acquire the ability to discriminate between falsity and truth. And what is truth? It is that which will report to the individual what to count as an addition to his sense of what a meaningful life is, something that must be worked on an individual basis since there are no universals to guide his behavior. This zone of indecipherables couches truth in a meeting between the more disturbing anxieties, such as wondering if the future will be bleak or not, and then destroying the worries with the realization that rationality will create a route by intersubjectively putting the individual in a situation to intricately create his future.

Of course, we have to deal with the situation of powerlessness that people find themselves in, but this is a fallacy. The only reason that people feel powerless is out of fear, and sometimes the fear is justified. But to rage against the suppressive mechanisms that try to make his life meaningless is to advocate for himself in a way that the prescience of rationality can rise in his situation as a buffer to the powerlessness he will inevitably feel. Perhaps this sense of powerlessness will continue as an anxiety that cannot be completely eradicated. But lessening the anxiety through advocacy can be said to use the rational faculty as a bludgeon to keep the worse effects from being too active in the mind.

But in all this talk of the rational, what do we do with emotion?

Emotions are not necessarily so apposite from rationality as it would at first seem. Making emotional decisions, of course, have their disabilities, but it is really because emotions are not part of the executive function of the brain that they are devalued as a form of laying a foundation for a reasoning procedure. People tend to think of emotions

as an older, more archaic orientation to the world all because of locationism in neuroscience. Certainly this hypothesis is exceedingly helpful since it appears to be true that functions have particular locations in the brain, and the flight or fight impulse is usually traced back to the older part of the brain, the limbic system. The unfortunate effect of locationism is to view the brain as correlating different parts instead of looking at it as producing a whole, from which we derive the debate on consciousness.

Even though the location hypothesis is true on the face of it, it can be easy to lose the tremendous complexity of the brain with its billions of neurons and its strange capacity to adapt to situations so blithely, something called the plasticity of the brain. Consciousness has come about as a real problem to work on because we know that people think, and in this facility, there seems to be an urge to explain it, something Daniel Dennett has called intuition pumps. But our need to understand this thing that seems like common sense, we have thoughts because they are there is complicated by what has been termed an explanatory gap. How do we extract an explanation for consciousness when all we have to go on this human brain that we can only hope is a real mind because the wetware, the billions of neurons, really have no innate capacity to give us this thing called consciousness? Many will be prone to calling it an illusion where we process our representations of the world in a place called the Cartesian Theater (Dennett again). The drive to understand this mechanism has led to people being in different camps with those who wish to view us as machines whose thought processing potential is merely a set of competencies that even lower animals have, so that the “problem of consciousness” is boiled down to a debate on whether we are just a batch of functions or is there something essential to consciousness that make us unique, thinking individuals? Again the assault

on the individual has reared its ugly head, and we, as yet, have no way of resolving the debate except we continue to press our theory with some kind of forcefulness that will have the value of universal acceptance.

But to save the individual from falling into a mechanical regard, we have to accept that there are flaws to the locationist hypothesis raised for us in the debate on consciousness. The mere fact that there are locations for functions in the brain does not decisively give us a brain of parts that interact in some unexplainable way, but there could be an alternate explanation that says the functions we have are not just there in a correlative position, but there is something about the brain that overrides the mere functionality of it with a sense that the uniqueness of the individual is something we can support with these functions contributing to a whole that eludes us perhaps, but the sheer fact of the whole's existence is to endow the individual with the power to act in the world, something of an evolutionary inheritance that can only be taken away with the laws of nature themselves changing. We fit into society with the values of cooperation and equality because our brains are also wired to produce the social animals that we are. There may be problems that we cannot overcome in our theory of what the individual is, but we have the ability to treat the theory of locationism as incomplete for explaining the totality of brain and behavior. We have to accept the limits of our understanding the brain in toto, and live with an explanation that serves to promote the uniqueness of each individual's own set of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors as something that recognizes a holistic approach, sometimes called mereology. We can't just reject that which we do not like, but have the confidence to assess functioning as a normal part of being-in-the world. Now we have the idea that the nature of reality is a settled question because we can

explore the more forceful idea that the social animal and the individuated being are two sides of the same coin. They interact in a way that makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts because the sum of its parts only leads back to a faulty emphasis on locationism. To reach that more valuable ideal of the whole, we simply have to reason that the individual is something that transcends its own boundaries, and in this new perception realize that the sheer importance of having individuals at all lies in the absoluteness of their value. Here we can explore the Christian assumption that individuals are at their best when they are being-for-others. But this is not a necessary condition for the individual to make his place in the world. Oneself as another suggests that the only thing that will bring value is in the social interaction itself, which, as I have argued, is only one concern among many. We have to be careful that the Christian point of view doesn't devalue the individual in a false rendering of humility as self-abasement, and really press our agenda that the individual needs self-regard or a sense of self-importance that does not rest on a set of false beliefs. In our attempt to define truth above, we find that what counts as true for the individual may not spread universally to everyone else. The nature of truth is to hide in a way. It is not a self-evident concept, so we have to train ourselves to seek it even though we may be feeling in the dark so to speak. Truth seems to possess this darkness; not wanting to reveal itself except as the machinations of a seeker teases it out from its darkened position. Truth seems to hide itself because the false beliefs that people hold about the world makes it a thing that requires courage to say to oneself and another that "I am" is stronger than "I am not."

Whether or not there can even be such a thing as truth is a difficult question to answer even with the confident declaration that I am a unique individual who operates in

the open spaces in my identity as a feature of being-in-the-world. The *Lebenswelt* tells me that there is a manner, a way of acting that demarcates me from others whose own sense of themselves would necessarily rate lower than my own declaration. Truth is the proposition that the *way* I act is consonant with what I do when I act. Just as a piece of writing is judged as much by its style as its contents, so also am I judged by the manner I employ in the search for meaning. Meaning and truth seem to be concepts that interact with each other, so that the elusiveness of both becomes an anxiety I have to deal with. But if we take up Kierkegaard's call for completing "the task," we alleviate the pressure on my personality through embracing the difficulties of life as open spaces to be explored, almost as if my own individuality were a mirror of the very reality I am trying to locate. Since it is the objectivity leaning sense data that I am trying to reject, the interior life blossoms under the tutelage of my own emotive responses to my rational powers, thus making a whole that grasps the edifice of truth, the thing that lays just beyond my reach like an asymptote. But the more I migrate towards the axis the asymptote never quite reaches, the more truth becomes apparent because truth lives in the unreachable zones of the human ability to grasp something beyond itself, but meaning lies in this shade of truth's shadow, and in trying to understand something that even the best of efforts cannot reveal, it is the struggle that matters, the toughness of mind that the act of being an individual implies. Reason, then, from this standpoint, is only the first jump off a cliff that thrusts one into a sense of freefall that is healthy in the sense that "falling" is one of the principles of our desire to know. This principle has been called "cognitive desire," and it relates to the rational faculty trying to understand itself as a being that, though limited, stands as a real feature of the world whose very presence in

this world demands an explanation even if one is dilapidated or missing. We cannot always assume that the universe is so constructed to reveal itself at all, which is why I gave the image of the asymptote. As we plunge headlong into that migration towards the axis, we acquire more and more of the truth about our existence, and eternal as this process is, activate the rational faculty to grasp the meaning that rides along with us, acquiring inputs that helpfully expose the correlatives of brain functioning, the emotions and the executive brain, in a way that exposes a perception holistically putting together the interior facts of our existence. What happens is that truth and meaning appear in the perceptual field the more we move closer to this whole, and we are able to find the meaning of our existence in the unstable moments of recognition that add to our infinitely open identities, so we may say that the implementation of a reasoning procedure relies on this regard of truth and meaning as infinite possibilities that far outstrip our lives, so the project of meaning making continues at the borders of consciousness that limit us with a horizon where we have come to an awakening of our full potential in view of this limitation. With infinity and limitation entangling, the individual is left to reason his way into the elusive whole that will report on his life what is more important additions to his identity rather than broadening his identity in a way that will only produce a cacophonous situation. Chaos is to be avoided as a sense of order arises, and the individual, now opened to the inchoate world where he finds himself in opposition to the theistic program that obscures more than it explains, and in this denial, the individual finds himself traveling in an emotional stasis where the truth becomes Truth, an absolute figuration that informs the individual that he truly is in control of his own life. Meaning in life may stay in the shadows, but it reveals itself the more we implement our invented reasoning skills

in a tremendous recognition of secular faith, which is to say that faith becomes the accomplishment of ardent searches for Truth as a holistic procedure as we cull through the additions to our discourse that promise not a future reward perhaps but a moment by moment awakening into a reality we can understand once we accept our situation of openness and flexibility. Finally, we have become what we always have been, and that is being an individual.

The Western Question

The western religious tradition comes with so much baggage that reinventing the wheel has been the preferred method of newcomers. Mormonism, for instance, innovated on the Trinity by proposing that God is a person of body and bone as is Jesus, while only the Holy Ghost is allowed to wander the heavens unimpeded by the fetters of embodiment. Their idea of the Godhead is one in which the three separate “people” must work together like a management team in a company, and one can only wonder if they experience the disconnection as a kind of suffering, since the only thing they share in common is the goal of governing the universe. I suppose that one could accuse Mormonism of tri-theism, something the Catholics went to great lengths to avoid at the Council of Nicaea. But the Mormon hypothesis is a far cry from a return to paganism, which was known for its tolerance of other gods, and continued to act like any other Christian denominations that wanted to routinize their principles into a theology,

however incoherent it might seem, since Mormonism refuses a debt to its philosophical antecedents, thinking them part of the corruption affecting Christianity that thrust it into an apostasy. The desire to be completely new by redesigning religious terminology makes Mormons into innovators, a position that flourished during the age of their founder, Joseph Smith, but kind of fell into a funk afterwards since additions to existing principles were virtually absent. The status of Mormon theology is one of being frozen in time where, perhaps, the congregants believe that they have all they need to save their souls, so who cares about the lack of debate over potential additions to their theology?

The tension between praxis and theory has always been a problem for those who recognize the need to have principles that adjure people to act on their beliefs while having a secure connection to the system of beliefs that inform their actions. Some religions will simply advise their people to read the Bible, and in acquiring personal messages, act in accordance with their own interpretations, preferring to eschew any overarching idea that would provide a norm. The tendency to leave people to their own devices runs high because a systematized theology just doesn't seem necessary to the leaders. The western question on the nature of religious reality has suffered from this emphasis on individual interpretation opposed to the catechism that the Catholics think is so important to teach people what the religion wants them to believe. We can say, then, that the question facing western religion is how best to have a religious life when they may not be aware of how the forces of evil interact with the good in ways that makes the plurality of approaches a descent into madness, where there are kinds of morality and kinds of being that make the search for a clear conception of a God-centered reality problematic.

Take the example of Joel Osteen who preaches in one of those megachurches that seem to be more and more attractive to people seeking something that is less demanding. Joel Osteen, while using scriptures sometimes out of context so they don't really add to his message, just preaches doctrines of positive thinking that waters down the message of religion so much, it seems impossible to tell if he has any idea what the history of Christianity has been arguing over since he doesn't engage any of the controversies in religion but simply preaches a prosperity gospel where people are supposed to believe in God because it will reward them in tangible and immediate ways.

People like Joel Osteen just want their congregants to feel good about themselves and so preaching some form of theology just detracts from the simplicity of a message that is designed to fill the seats with people whose contributions will line his already ample pockets. He received a thirteen million dollar advance for one of his books, so he hardly needs the money. Many televangelists fly in private planes and forsake the message of the gospels that one should be like Jesus who had nowhere to hang his head. Actually, Jesus may have been speaking metaphorically because many scholars believe that he was far from poor because to move in the circles he did would not be possible for someone who did not at least rank in the middle classes. Certainly, his friendship with Joseph of Arimathea suggests that he probably had several if not many wealthy donors that kept his mission alive and his position in society unreflectively secured.

Actually, there was a debate in the Middle Ages between two competing orders in the Catholic church about whether one should follow the perceived poverty of Jesus, or to live in luxury since they believed this is what Jesus would have wanted. The bishops of the church took the stand of living in luxury whereas the cloistered monks believed in the

way of poverty. The issue was never really resolved, and now the church just tolerates this fracture in the dogma as something that was all right to worry about in the past, but now the various orders that exist in the church just have their own guiding principles and they really need not worry about these ancient debates since the level of harmony between the various orders is high enough to quell any discontent.

But there are debates that have their antecedents many years ago. One of these comes from Plato, whose mentor, Socrates, posed questions that have currency even today. One of these is the Euthyphro problem. This asks the question whether the Gods command one to follow the virtues because the gods command it, or do the gods command virtue because the virtues are good in themselves? This question carries with it some unsettling questions about God. Is God bound in some way to universal laws that he has no control over because the laws themselves do not need a God to recognize them? The idea that God could be subject to something outside of himself raises uncomfortable assumptions for those who believe in his omnipotence. Since it is possible to regard virtue as something that would remain efficacious whether a God had them in his mind as objects of creation or not, raise questions about what other areas make God obsolete. One way of resolving the Euthyphro problem is to view God as a natural part of the universe, and since he is embedded in the way the universe works, there really is no way to tell where God begins and the universe leaves off, making God into a substance, the ground of all things. Tillich thought that the discovery of the idea of substance is what led to more mature perspectives on the composition of God. With the idea that God is a substance, we have a way of conceiving of the divine as pure mind, regarding his creation

as a thinker himself, and through his divine stream of consciousness, we have the reality we have.

But the reality we have underwent much debate, perhaps most notably with George Berkeley, who said that perception is the only way we have of knowing that reality is really something outside ourselves or whether reality can only be apprehended when our senses perceive it. This idea tends to lock the individual into a regard of reality as only the creation of his own mind, but he got out of the problem by saying that God is the ultimate perceiver, so we can be assured that the things outside of ourselves exist apart from ourselves through God's mind perceiving the world in a constant engagement with the world. But if this were true, then we have a problem with recognizing the role of sin, since if God is the ultimate perceiver, what he manages to keep in reality has sometimes subjected humans to some very nasty phenomena, like war and crime, so we have a problem with keeping God spotless if his mind is producing all these deleterious effects. It raises the specter of what kind of God God is.

Trying to ruminate on the nature of God has been a favorite past time for philosophers throughout the ages. Plato called him the demiurge who organized the chaos before the world was. The pre-Socratic philosopher, Parmenides, called reality The One, and he used the idea of the logos as a rational principle that referred to order and justice. For Parmenides, reality could be framed in an is-was, something that meant that reality was both present and past so that The One could be schematized as a thing that comprehended the universe in one sweeping cognitive event. Indeed, Hans Jonas called the discovery of the logos as one of the most important events of the ancient world because it gave philosophers the ability to manipulate their perspectives on God in a way

that led away from less mature philosophies that were mired in the idea that God had to be so distant from the world that we really couldn't reconcile Him to our own aborted conclusions. Other pre-Socratics focused on the elements comprising the world that they saw as primary: earth, water, fire, and air. Thales emphasized water as the most important element because it could change form so easily and it was so pervasive that the world seemed like a constantly undulating group of changes of this one element. As we have discussed, Thales mentions pantheism, but, in taking a close look, we can see that his fascination with water (Bruce Lee too), exposes the initiating moment for how he came to this epiphanic moment on God. Water is something so essential that we would die without it of course. But there is a contradictory principle involved. While water sustains all life, and animals get eaten on a regular basis at the watering hole because of this need, it also shows great power to destroy. The contradictory nature of water evolves into an assumption that there must be something special about it. Thales had to tease out why water was both creator and destroyer, not unlike the Hindu god Shiva. Even as I mention Shiva, we can see that Thales began to understand the true nature of water, with all of its protean aspects, as something reaching divine status; hence the pantheism.

The question of what kinds of things either are in reality or of what reality is made has kept theologians busy with the central problem always keeping God in the forefront of the discussion while having to account for such things as diversity and variety in nature. Should we consider that God merely created things as they are because it suited his Will to do so, and if he did, we are left with the problem of evil. We discussed this idea in the introduction, but further elaboration is offered here. The problem of evil is not easily resolved because we expect God to be an entity that wants to produce good in

human beings. But there are many people who think that humans are inveterate sinners, and they really cannot be good people without some method of expiation. If we accept this view, something that nearly every western religion does, then we have to accept that reality is the way it is because human beings have made it that way. This idea brings up the question, why is it God's intention to allow evil in the world? In other words, why didn't he make life better?

It does seem somewhat counterintuitive that we have a God who could have made the world in any way he wished, and yet the world we have seems to be rife with obscenities against man and nature that humans would not tolerate, let alone a God. If God had any intention of inserting himself in some way in this world then it clearly hasn't worked because there is no way to find the reflection of God in the myriad world problems from the beginning of time until today. We are like babies who first come into the world without any sense of right and wrong or what the world ought to be like. The fact that full-grown adults still share this natal view exposes the lack of what we might call effective intelligence. In order for an intelligent person to be really effective in the world, he must move beyond the assumptions that seem almost like bedrock formations in the psyche. How many people just accept the society they have as if there were no other options to running a government or even having a civilization. Einstein believed in a one-world government, a prospect that may frighten those who hold sovereignty so dearly in their values and don't realize how global the world is becoming through technology and commerce, something that means our interconnectedness with the rest of the world is already assured, and sovereignty issues have already been laid aside except in the political arena where a one nation ideology produces the illusion that we can

isolate our interests from the rest of the world because it has already contracted into a more diverse situation from which it can never probably expand out to again. The obsolescence of sovereign borders contributes to this constricted view of the world that the unaware have. Even as I write these words, there are demonstrations going on in several countries for their leaders to step down, something that were spurred on through the use of the Internet. I believe face book became the epicenter of a worldwide desire for greater freedom.

With the philosophical tradition in the west interacting with religion in interesting ways, we have to produce a way of regarding this interaction as if there were a split somewhere along the line, and if theology is truly a separate tradition than the philosopher's perplexities. Certainly with God being the major object of inspection, we can see that the debates during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries leave us with a curious regard of religion. Many of the thinkers in the western philosophical tradition were dedicated to at least approaching asking questions about God, so if there were a rift, it perhaps has something to do with the fallacious assumptions of some of these thinkers. Descartes had a fascination with mechanisms. He thought that simulacra of human beings were an interesting study to undertake. It wasn't the mechanical mind he was interested in investigating, but the mechanical body. He was famous for thinking that the seat of the soul was in the pineal gland, perhaps because it was the one structure in the brain that did not have a counterpart in another place in the brain. The duplication of brain structures across the hemispheres seemed like a vexing problem for Descartes who desperately wanted a natural account of human interaction with the divine but couldn't reconcile what he thought he knew about the way the body interacts with the mind.

Descartes, it seems, was the first philosopher to make the mind/body problem real. Now, we still have contemporary debates about this issue, but neuroscience would like to see this go away since they believe that the brain, as a natural part of the human body, is just another organ. But is it? John Searle is famous for calling brain functions no different from the process of digestion, so we see here a push for the study of consciousness to deflate into a discussion on bodily functions, not mental ones. William James cautioned against regarding consciousness as an entity, or a really existing object one can explore, but emphasized his theory of the stream of consciousness acting like birds who sit on their perches just for a short time and then go occupy another branch. He thought of human attention as a fleeting thing that, when subjected to multiple stimuli, would only attend to each of them for a brief time before the mind goes wandering into another reflection. Aldous Huxley talked about a thing he called the Mind-at-Large as some overarching oversoul that only dripped in enough information to the human mind for everyday survival. His solution was LSD, so it is not likely that serious people will count his addition to the debate very willingly. But the point is, the search for the seat of the soul, which began with Descartes has been studiously taken up by our modern theologians who at least want to believe in a separate discipline formed from the material of philosophy perhaps, but now belongs to them as an inheritance they try hard to refuse.

With the nature of God being the prime reference point for the theologians, we have to understand whether there is anything more to be added. How do we get to a regard of God as potentially capable of being supplemented?

Whether or not we can settle the question over the healthiness of continued speculation on the nature of God, we may have to back up and decide if God is a being

worth worshipping at all. For instance, Karl Barth will write about the need to have certainty in our own religious convictions, while, in the same breath, admitting that God is hidden, and we have to try to apprehend him in less direct ways. Certainly the mystics think of God as the supremely Real, and it is through a program of being in a position to feel in contact with that ultimate reality that the mystic (western ones, by the way) completes an arduous journey through the impediments of experiencing God in a disavowal of the easier path of the orthodox approach of following simple rules. In fact, the Biblical canon that we have now was solidified as such because people wanted to know what to do, and it seemed like the best way was to provide them with a very basic plan. Thus, the rules in the orthodox tradition are really simple because to offer something otherwise would perhaps be too confusing to the religionist who does not want to think too deeply about what kind of religious life to live. And the leaders who canonized the Bible as such really wanted it to reflect something that would keep their congregants from throwing away their Bibles and cease going to church because they simply could not conform their lives to a teaching that was too difficult.

The mystics thought otherwise. Their path to God was made necessarily difficult because they regarded God as an expression of the ineffable. While Barth would not go this far, preferring simply to emphasize his hiddenness not his incomprehensibility, the mystics understood their path to God as fraught with difficulties because they were simply wired to take this path. Many of them had visions, like Hildegard of Abingden who used such bizarre imagery, like a monster coming out of her vagina, that the church looked sideways at her, but didn't burn her at the stake just in case her visions were indeed contacts with God. Other mystics weren't so lucky. Some of them believed that

once one had reached a certain level of spirituality, they no longer sinned and were free to act as they wished. This created a problem with the church labeling mystics who felt this way heretics. Ignatius Loyola, now a revered saint, had his career challenged in very vicious personal attacks, and if he had not died before the church rendered a decision about his writings, he would have fallen under the iron thumb of orthodox forms of justice. It seemed like the church was forever in conflict with their mystics.

So with one group of people revering a difficult path to God, and one group believing in easy answers to what would be actually vexing questions, the religious universe seemed divided on what was the best way to have a confrontation with God. This leads back to the question of what kind of God do we have to put up with, especially since we need to have mediators to help us judge this. If God were truly as benevolent as the orthodox claim, then why do we have this problem of evil, labeled a problem as such because our best intuitions seem to tell us that if God is real, then he wants the best for us, even if what we get is very substandard. The question is less about why God allows evil to flourish, then about how our world could be as it is when surely there were other options God could have followed in his creation of the world.

The vexing problem of what kind of God we have, and the intuition that things could be otherwise head us into speculations that perhaps God is absent in a particular way; that he doesn't involve himself in creation as directly and immediately as we first thought. It only seems natural to assume that if God were the kind of creature that really cared about his creations, then we would have more intervention when things go south because, if it were true that God is love and he has boundless compassion, then why do we have a world that perpetuates cruelty and punishes the innocent while the corrupt get

rewarded and suffering is unfairly distributed? One thinker said that morality has become impossible because of the Shoah, or the attempted extinction of Jews by the Nazis. Milgram, alarmed by the mindset of the average German soldier who went along with this, conducted experiments where he wanted to see if people could be cajoled into being cruel if the presence of an authority figure prompted them to be so. What he did was put a person in a booth who was an actor, and instructed them to let out cries of pain as a faked electric shock went through their body. The individuals they recruited were deceived into thinking that the knob they were to turn in order to deliver this shock would increase in voltage every time they manipulated the knob with a cut off point pointed out to them as delivering a mortal blow. The authority figure would simply instruct the individual to turn the knob, and as they heard the cries from inside the booth, the expectation was that they would ultimately relent. But, over 60% actually went beyond the safe area and delivered the highest shock. This experiment shows that people are generally influenced to a great degree by the presence of an authority figure who has explained to the person that they need to turn the knob, and the lack of expressing concern for the person in the booth seems to be an overly trusting attitude in the authority figure. This led some researchers to develop what they called an F scale, to determine how close to having a fascist attitude people actually were. All these things go to show that morality in people seems to be deeply affected by how they perceive the expectations of people they believe know more than them, and the neutral attitude of the authority figure seems to give license to people to do things simply out of a misguided reliance on a command, seeming to both prove that the German soldiers were willing to commit huge atrocities in the name of following orders, and that morality seems to be contingent upon

the situation that people find themselves in, somewhat proving the idea that morality is impossible, something that Michel Foucault himself once wrote and, in his context, this was so because the city-state had degenerated into a formless, faceless sense of powerlessness that left citizens bereft and made that contingently related sense of morality effectively absent.

So, if we live in a world where morality can only be a contingent thing, dependent on the good will of the people who are expected to practice it, then what does that mean for our discussion of God? Is he truly morally beneficent if the world we have isn't?

Perhaps at this point some would like to argue that the world is the way it is because people have made it that way, that through our blackened nature, God remains aloof from our problems hoping we will solve them for ourselves. But this brings up a notion of autonomy that most thoughtful people could not assent to. The individual is caught in a social nexus that won't free him from the necessity to act in a group, and practicing a kind of individualism that would make him autonomous in the way we have described is really impossible because of the threat to society he poses. If everyone acts autonomously, in other words, imposing their will on the other members of the group, then we fall into a chaotic situation where social constraints have no suasion. While the idea of being ultimately free is attractive, ultimatums have a way of producing unstable demands on the human personality. People may feel a sense of ultimate freedom, but this may only be an illusion because of environmental pressures that cause people to act contrary to their values or pursue a way of life that really doesn't contribute to their happiness. And it also should be said that there are different ways of being happy. There is a story about a young student of a yogi master asking him what was the best way to

achieve happiness. The yogi master took him to a village where a woman was sitting on the steps of her house and was laughing and playing with her children. The yogi master asked his student if this was not happiness. The student responded that he didn't want this kind of happiness.

To live in ignorance, to live an unexamined life is often thought to be a lower form of being than the person who has knowledge and wisdom, something that gives them a kind of happiness that is informed by their study of reality and the enlightenment they hope to achieve through serious study of the method of rising above normal human constraints. Therefore, living in ignorance of higher principles would be a less attractive mode of life than those who embrace those higher principles. This fact that there is more than one way to be happy suggests that the variety of nature also reflects the variety of being people can subscribe to. But knowing that a certain path will lead to happiness is difficult in any case because we still have to understand what kind of happiness God wants us to have.

The idea of a God wanting something is a problem because many ideas about God simply have him as a divine mind that really doesn't trouble himself with the actions of his creatures, which seems to be the case with his strict adherence to a non-interference policy in the affairs of humankind. The atheists perhaps delight in this, as the evidence for God is very thin, and can only be verified individually. The fact that individuals often get things wrong makes their testimony of contact with God suspicious because the kind of contact we have with God is necessarily extra-sensory. What we have for evidence is really the way the world is, and we have shown the world to be quite defective as suggested by all the bad things that exist in it. One can complain that the world needs

evil in order to have good, but this is actually an attempt to argue a way out of the problem of evil, since we can demonstrate that the amount of evil in the world seems to trump good so consistently that we still have to find a way not to hold God responsible. So we can see where the problem of evil comes from when our assumptions about what a God is keep getting challenged with each incidence of evil triumphing. If we take the War in Heaven story seriously, for example, then we have to assume that there was a human like quality in the Lucifer who thought it possible to challenge an omnipotent being. Since God created Lucifer, we have to assume that he meant evil to enter the world. We can only imagine that time is not linear for God, but that he sees things in that one cognitive event as Parmenides intuited. So, past, present, and future are really conflated into one eternal view. He has no history and no future since he is bound by the conditions of being a God.

This idea brings up the question just how does God act at all since there seem to be rules that even a God has to follow. Whether or not we believe in his omnipotence, we still have to admit that quarreling with God's approach to the invention of reality may turn out to be a useless exercise because God simply must follow the dictates bequeathed to him (by other gods?). There is no way to rescue God from being himself even if we wanted to convince him to change reality because a God cannot change, and thus we are stuck with the reality we have.

We can say, at the very least, that relying on God to do anything to make the world change would be a pointless exercise because apparently, what we have for a reality is an absolute reflection of who God is so long as we accept that God can only form intentions consonant with his personality, meaning that he can only do what gods

do, and apparently, making crummy realities is something that gods do. So if people develop negative attitudes toward God, then perhaps this is his desired outcome for the principle of justice, so revered by many religionists (mostly because they feel most people ought to go to hell) but rejected by other thinkers because justice is just as contingent as morality is. Justice suggests fairness, but things in the world are rarely fair, so how to get a society to act justly becomes a problem related to morality since the actual threat of its application becomes a real possibility.

The idea that morality could pose a threat perhaps can be realized in the example of the hatred religionists have for homosexuals. Even though homosexuals are quite benign, they create rabid attitudes in the religionist's mind with the only reason they could possibly have is the way they have sex seeming to be abhorrent. Religionists can only point to an obscure passage in Leviticus, in the Old Testament, that seems to make homosexuality a sin, but the bulk of Leviticus has been so widely rejected such as the adjuration to stone adulterers, that this nitpicking over possible behaviors grounding itself in an already rejected document makes the hatred of homosexuals a certain kind of madness. Where our genitals go during sex seems to form a preoccupation with the gay haters that they may have issues with sexuality themselves. Since there is a stigma against sex that falls without the accepted norms such as bondage or other perversions, it seems that Christians will only indulge in the missionary position, making us wonder how fulfilling their own sex lives are.

With this focus on singling out almost randomly a single group to persecute makes religion not only fanatical but also insane. Christians seem to forget that they too were a persecuted group under the Romans, but this ignorance of history is perhaps what

perpetuates this insane *idée fixe* on something that is hardly a threat, on the contrary, they produce threatening behaviors themselves as if they were doing God's work. They have embraced the problem of evil by ingesting it with the wafers they believe transubstantiates into an actual bodily substance.

This idea that the problem of evil is actually found in the interior life of the religionist is part of this insanity that gives rise to false beliefs about the world, beliefs that mythologize religious ideas as concrete elements that could be seen if only they were righteous enough to make an unseen thing appear in reality. A famous medium once said that the veil separating this life from the next would eventually grow so thin that we could have open conversations with those otherworldly beings. She boldly announced that it would be belief that compelled the thinning and that there are simply too many believers to overwhelm the unbelievers and make the unreal real. People who make such statements probably don't believe what they are saying themselves, but they have a sociopathic need to say things that will get people to buy their books, and pay the exorbitant fee to have a reading. So we can say that the threat the morality poses have some roots in the love of money that Christians show in their conservative agenda for capitalism. It was once said that you cannot serve God and Mammon, Mammon being a code word for money, but having a moral civil society, society where justice indeed equates to fairness would mean making money less of a concern with the great gap between the poor and the rich being lessened. But since a false dichotomy is created between communism and capitalism, with the former obviously a failed system, Christians seem content with the way society is, despite their cries of sin being behind all

the world's problems. The man in the mirror, so called, is really at fault, but the human heart has all the capacity for wickedness that the world needs.

This emphasis on outward conditions being responsible for the evil in the world ignores the fact that anyone could stop the madness at any time simply by choosing to reflect on their inner life. The belief that our society is something that just requires a little tweaking to make ideal is another false belief that ignores the power individuals have to remake society into something that would push evil into a more incidental position. For all the talk of free will, religionists actually submit to a form of determinism that makes their mythologized sense of justice overwhelm commonsense with a drive to suppress anything their narrow perspective on reality wants to reject. We have the reality we have not just because of God's incompetence, which is part of it, but because of the individual's unwillingness to expurgate the problem of evil in his inner world, something that seems to be so consuming that he can hardly imagine that he is the beginning and end of the problem so blinded by his sense of objectivity being necessarily out-there, completely removed from his sense of control. His in-here reality is thought to be so private that nothing should impinge on it without the individual's consent. But the problem with this kind of thinking is that it ignores the fact that what appears in reality is put there by individual thought first, so the tight connection between cause and effect, so important for scientific investigation, gets muddled.

Science needs a taut connection for cause and effect, but there is no reason why, at the level of the individual, that the connection should be so necessary. In fact, it seems to be the case that the connection between cause and effect is challenged by the problem of evil itself. If it were the case that evil were only an out-here reality perhaps buttressed

by sinning, then we can say with confidence that the devil is responsible for evil although how he gained so much control remains ambiguous. The cause becomes the devil who then passes on his evil intentions onto the heart of man, who then becomes pure effect, merely tool for the devil. But God created the devil, so did God intend this battle for the heart of man to be so daunting? Why do people choose to do evil unless they were, in a way, coded for it?

The question for western religion really revolves around this unrecognized out-here/in-here tension where the problem of evil gains its traction, not because it is a really existing entity, but because the nature of reality is interpreted as a problem for the wicked who more often than not get mislabeled because their evil is revealed as the universal problem it actually is. This pervasiveness of evil is such an irresolvable problem that, in returning to morality, the threat of good to masquerade as evil comes up in the threat that morality poses to everyone who fails the Christian litmus test of what counts as a virtue for them. Morality as a threat, as a bludgeon against those who don't share their values, makes it a tool of evil, which perhaps needs further defining.

Evil is anything which isn't good, which means that there are wide swaths of territory where our worst expectations get fulfilled. Atrocities are one notch up from everyday general badness and get a capital letter, Evil. Inasmuch as we are unable to put out every fire evil starts, we should be able to put an end to Evil. God's creation has morphed into an unintelligible form that sets the bar for anything done in the name of morality. We can say that the smaller evils such as mistreatment fall short of the real trouble that begins with a good intention and then flowers into a full-fledged nightmare. The killing of abortion doctors comes to mind as something where the murderer expects

his actions to be applauded when the actual predicament of society has been revealed. Where along the pregnancy we can label the fetus a human is a decidedly difficult process, and the rejection of even stem cell research makes those religionists insane again. Commonsense should at a minimum tell us that potential humans are not the same as actual humans no matter how hard we try to get the biology to agree with us, and a simple cost/benefit analysis should suffice for understanding the real benefits of using stem cells, and not give in to the madness that compels religionists to indulge in the imaginary so often that they have invented a class of beings whose mere potentiality qualifies them for some kind of protection.

Who is a protected class is a real concern, but making up categories on the assumption that this is what God wants is so quixotic that reasonable people should not be persuaded. Evil should be identified as something that has tangible effects in the real world, and the fact that people only classify evil as such, their definitions get imported into their ideology and then anything can qualify as an evil act, whether it really is or not. Classification systems tend to have this passive quality of just reaching an identifiable threshold and then get taken up as a real entity even when to do so is to violate reason in a vicious attack. The fact is, religionists have a problem with rationality since their convictions are so mired in illusory predicates. But what can we expect from people whose whole worldview is based on a kind of white magic complete with talismans not meant just for the warding off of evil but for the bolstering of their religious attitudes so desperately clinging to falsehoods that only report to them the actual status of reality when they are experiencing their inertial phenomena. We can become relativists and say that this is well and good for them, but I can only disagree. Unfortunately, this live and

let live attitude only paves the way for Evil to get a toehold in the insanity of a morality that adjusts to each situation according to how threatening it is, something that makes them threaten back.

The ignorance of the layman about the nature of reality, meaning the lack of reflection in his inner life, only perpetuates the morality which is actually amorality, and the problem of evil existing in a suspended state within the individuals in-here reality, we have good intentions that turn sour because this sense of evil sneaks into the individual's morality, making it the threatening thing it is. What then is to be done with two competing evils, one which more obviously persecutes the innocent, and one which seems to be moral when morality has been revealed as truly amoral?

The question facing western religions then, is how to reconcile what they think they know about evil with the deficient reality they believe has a chance for containing moral principles when they have actually imbibed the problem of evil, something that makes their definitions of evil and morality disputable, and wrests peaceful judgments away from more benign influences. All is sturm and drang in the world, so learning to recognize the good in the constantly fluctuating personae of evil tends to make evil unrecognizable as a concept at all, conflating what we think about reality into what reality actually is, something with a zero decidability factor, so we wander the world lost in the myriad ideals we want so desperately to latch onto without realizing that the one thing we can never have, certainty, is the one thing that rescues us from damned futures, and in never being able to achieve this, have to deal with our in-here self as a projection onto the out-there, and we ratchet down the concepts of religion until the hysteria over who made who becomes something we can more easily assimilate.

The Eastern Answer

If we can think of the western question as a requirement to live in a morally abrasive reality that does little to inform us about who God is since it is the nature of reality to reveal an uglier face for God than most religionists would want to accept, the other side of the world was innovating religiously as well, but asking all kinds of different questions. In a peculiar way, the easterner's probing of reality would be a much different discussion on the problems confronting us than the west is able to successfully provide. Their intuitions of what counts as a morally permissible way of living is not encumbered by the assumptions that plague western thinking on religion, because the questions confronting them arose in a different climate with its own cultural strictures and intellectual achievements. Thinking of Asian philosophy as an achievement though would take some time as shown when Hegel was exposed to it, and found it to be quaint

perhaps, but immature and undeserving of accolades. The western world already had biases against Asian ways of thought probably through a basic misunderstanding of what it means to have a religion that is too differently configured than the west's knowledge of their own religious proclivities. Westerners and easterners simply process information differently, something that rather stands western religion on its head and labels its anxieties in a totally different way. But the easterner's peculiar way of approaching the problems inherent in religion so differently requires them to brace themselves for an attitude of inferiority from their western brethren. Actually, the west would look at eastern ways of thought not only with disdain, but also with a little fear that perhaps the other side of the world was a little bit insane; a contradiction of course because the west was only projecting its own self-deflation on these strange philosophies. What the west couldn't recognize, not to speak of the extreme difference of approach, was that, since eastern cultures were so different, eyes glaze over at the sight of a Buddhist sutra exploding ideas in a dynamite dynamic only a mind so oriented for understanding could possibly process. So an unrecognized animus would emerge between west and east with the niggling and somewhat annoying encroachment that a superiority intervened between them. It is probably the white beard of eastern thought, not to mention the bushy white eyebrows, menacing the obviously inferior mentality of the bent mind of the westerner who, in realizing the awful consequence of impotence, begins to fade into the dustbin of history in what is quickly becoming the Asian century.

The west's insistence on a creator God never penetrated the Asian intellect. The gods of Hinduism, being multiple, was a sort of paganism perhaps, but their emphasis on Brahmin reality, or the greater universe interacting with the individual's soul produced

the concept of the atman, which is the core self surviving in the cycle of rebirth with each new incarnation. The problem for the Hindu was to move beyond the Householder position and reach a point where Forest Dweller would be a kind of option assuring the individual that this kind of stratification was a morally beneficent position to be in.

The Hindu stages of living (not their caste system) would be a way of finding meaning once one was ready to embark on the journey. But the ultimate end of the road was just this ability to put worldly concerns away for a more promising inquiry into the nature of things. The Vedantas would be a moral guide but not the ultimate source since it would be the yogis who would guide the individual along his destined path. Yoga now is thought to be just a system of limbering exercise, people eternally looking up their anuses not realizing their blunted view was supposed to be a connection with the universe when all they experienced was a fatal pain in their asses. This obtuseness of westerners would totally miss the point of the exercise's purpose. While the real yoga practitioners would study their scriptures and learn the process of interpreting them at the feet of wise men, westerners merely follow a trend that the rich and famous embrace with an incredible phoniness. The s system of finding meaning is really about the relationship a student has with his master, and it was felt that cultivating that relationship would tutor the student in a way that would not just be morally beneficial but spiritually enervating as well. The life of a Hindu is about propitiating the right god and then figuring out his life's path through the tutelage of the master.

Then Gautama Buddha came into the picture in about 500 B.C. and changed everything for those interested in his message. While he tried the Hindu path for a while, even engaging in great ascetic practices that virtually ruined his health, he eventually

began to realize that the Hindus were wrong about their concept of an ether-like reality where one could join with once the atman was properly positioned to receive the strength of disciplined spiritual exercise. So with the Buddha, we had a new world religion birthed by his entrance into enlightenment, a new kind of spiritual renewal that rejected much of his former training in deference to what he thought he knew about his sudden insight into the true nature of reality. He was less interested in contacting Brahmin reality than he was in debunking the very idea of reality itself.

This led to the doctrine of no self, a complete reversal of the atman. Instead of there being a concrete self that one could build on with the adornments of more virtue, the Buddha felt that there was no core self, just the contrary, there wasn't any self at all. This transposition intersecting with a vacuous idea of originality really makes Buddhism vulnerable to many misreadings. This would be inevitable though. The level of originality in the concepts Gautama wove together sometimes resemble a child's random finger painting and, at the same time, this chaotic flight of thought would devolve into one of those 3D pictures that, with long enough staring, a spaceship would emerge in a kind of trancelike awakening that perhaps has a tinge of Buddhism in it. Pop culture is a lot more eastern than any westerner is capable of admitting.

While early Buddhist investigations into this concept eventually came up with a temporary self, called dharmas or momentary flickers of knowing that proved the individual was separate from another, the Buddha was actually teaching something completely new and different. According to the doctrine of no self, there just wasn't anything to the human personality except what the illusion of life made it think was solid and enduring. If one were to immerse himself in spiritual practice well enough, the

fetters of imagination would give way to a breakdown of the boundaries around the self, something that would free the individual from his lonely interiority and position him on the path to becoming a Buddha himself. In the early days of Buddhism, the level of salvation for an individual was thought reserved for just the few who could master the intellectual technology of being a nonbeing and turn toward the universal law that, if all is illusion, then the only way out of the cycle of rebirths is to recognize that the ultimate interconnectedness of humanity, through the doctrine of no self, was actually immanent.

The Buddha had set up a whole new set of anxieties for the human individual. Now, we no longer have to be saved from our sins because our spirits are so laden down with them, but we had to realize that there is no spirit to do any sinning, in fact there is no self to be saved at all. But this is where we run into a problem, because the doctrine of no self seems to be saying that we are empty shells, with only contingent existence, a life that is only made real by relentless grasping onto earthly attachments. This would form a paradox for the doctrine of the four noble truths as well. The first noble truth says that life is suffering, or *dukkha*. *Dukkha* was the intuition that people live in pain so long as they grasp onto the illusions of life. But if life is suffering and we want release from it, does the Buddha intend that we should end our lives just to alleviate this condition? The eightfold path was implemented to avoid this paradox, so that people would see that there was a point to living even if it meant suffering. But still the problem remains. If we are nothing inside and life is suffering, then the best possible way out of the conundrum seems to be ending life itself. But entering the Buddhist's path is a kind of ending. Once one has grasped that there is no self, and that life is supremely contingent on where along the path they are, then the ability to value life arises with the adoption of supreme

compassion for all living things, a method of bringing meaning while one suffers continuously from *dukkha*.

Westerners only recognize suffering as a something that happens to an individual that started as a stigma from sin, and nowadays, people have peripheral beliefs that tend in this direction, but while wondering if the person is suffering because of sin, they seem to have a belief that suffering is a component of God's judgment at the same time that external causes play some role in the management of a person's tendency to fall beneath the norm. Sinners aren't suffering so much as experiencing pangs of conscience, and so conscience becomes a factor in the level of happiness an individual can achieve. Breaking a commandment that the individual was intent on keeping and doing so willfully is the production of the person's shaky standing before God. But the fear of God's judgment would remain in the forefront of the westerner's mind because this is perceived as a sentence passed down to them if they didn't do as they were told. It's a kind of an infantilization of the human personality as it can't get beyond the idea that God is a father and we, as his children, must remain in thrall to him for the whole of our lives.

The Buddhist world doesn't treat their sangha or community of believers as children needing correction but as autonomous beings who want to develop good karma. Karma is the principle of justice for the Buddhists, a thing that keeps in balance good and evil deeds so that the individual's sense of right and wrong coalesces around the desire to carry with them a weight formed from the dictates of this universal principle guiding conduct. Whereas the westerner would forever wonder how they could possibly get into heaven, the Buddhist just wanted to make merit for himself so that his karma would ensure a better life for himself in his next incarnation. Of course, there would be folk

variations of this principle since many people just feel that a person's bad circumstance was the result of evil deeds in a former existence, something that makes the understanding of karma into a negative societal perception of people meriting their situations. But Buddhists really believe that karma is a balancing agent that does not account for a wholesale condemnation of those who have poorer life circumstances, as if all the wealthy people in the world were really saints in another life, but puts people into situations which harmonizes the universe with the tremendous varieties of having a good or bad life situation. The Buddhists are about harmony while the western religions are about submission to a father figure who dispenses blessings in a perfunctory dispensation of rewards and demerits.

Religion tends to produce in its adherents a sense of fear and trembling so that they will experience fear, even if it is just something in the back of their minds, for the whole of their lives, constantly trying to repent of the awful thoughts and sometimes dastardly deeds they perceive themselves committing. This self-policing aspect of the religionist's life puts an awful burden on their sense of self and weakens their sense of identity since its porous nature keeps them from being completely happy except when good things happen. And sometimes there is disillusionment. One writer tells the story of reporting on the Catholic sexual abuse controversy and how the Catholic Church acted like a bunch of thugs when dealing with the victims, not to mention the years long cover up of the whole scandal by those who were supposed to be acting in the place of God. The affair made him lose his faith, and he consequently experienced a fear of hell for a long time afterwards, but he got over his trepidation in living in a world without God. Again, this incident reveals that the human institutions that are supposed to be taking care

of their members actually threaten them with all kinds of potentially bad outcomes: not receiving blessings from God, putting them in fear of hell, and generally making them feel deficient all the time if they aren't constantly repenting and self-policing.

There is none of this in Buddhism. The constant in life is suffering, suffering even when one doesn't think so just because they are embodied mortal beings that have to navigate their challenges with the peace of a life devoted to developing compassion. The Buddhist concept of compassion strips away the judgmentalism of the western religions by helping people understand their place in the universe as a kind of fusion with all things and not an individual struggle to avoid some kind of awful punishment. There is a place where hell beings exist, but this world too passes away and it is only through entering Nirvana that an individual can finally find his rest. Nirvana seems like a scary concept to westerners because it implies that the individual personality snuffs out in a place of darkness where consciousness ceases and the "saved" individual no longer suffers in the cycle of rebirths but, in its transcendence, experiences a kind of ultimate rest.

Western religions expect their afterlife to be a mere continuation of life on earth with linear time and things to do like enjoying the pleasures of paradise. Because the idea of nirvana would be so foreign to them, the idea of eternal rest would seem like a form of hell to them. Eternity should be a place of blinding light, not darkness, but the Buddhist has the expectation that, since even our thoughts plague us, eternal rest is the most pleasant possible outcome. This concept is instantiated in Buddhism because of the first noble truth that life is suffering, so the only way to escape it is to put an end to all the impingements of an earthly life. Later, there would be further developments that

complicated the Buddhist's view of the universe such as Mahayana Buddhism gaining a foothold in the Buddhist point of view.

The teachings of Mahayana Buddhism were quite radical, but its rise into the consciousness of Buddhists would be gradual, so there really was no revolution in religious thought per se, but the ideas sprang from the ground of Buddhist intuitions themselves. People would not be completely aware that their sense of how their religion works was changing, but that the early doctrines of the Buddha were undergoing a transformation. Mahayana Buddhism introduced the concept of universal salvation, meaning that anyone could become a Buddha, in fact, there were many Buddhas in what had become a pantheon of beings who had achieved such a level. Also populating this world were Bodhisattvas, who are beings who could enter nirvana, but choose not to because they have boundless compassion for all living things and forego their entrance into it in order to help people discover their own spiritual potential. Ariyamateyya is the name of a Bodhisattva who is often depicted as a woman and is roundly felt to be actively engaged with Buddhists seeking release from their suffering. This change into divine figures appearing in Buddhism builds a foundation for a new way of regarding the religion. Suddenly, we had Buddhist writers giving their opinions on what it meant to live a successful life. One of these new intuitions was the discovery of emptiness (Sunyata).

Sunyata was the idea that there is literally nothing in reality. Not only are concepts empty of content, empty of meaning, or empty of effective logic, but also the whole idea is to see reality in a new way. Suddenly, there are no people to be saved, no one to do the saving, in fact, there is nothing whatever to what we would consider a

stable reality. Reality had been truncated down into a form of nonbeing, where the point was to reach a new level of perception. The only reason we have a perception of reality at all is the mistaken assumption that reality is real, something that the conventional level of truth makes more solid. But because there is an ultimate level of truth, a truth which suggests this fall into nothingness, the samsara realm and the ultimate reality, which is no reality at all, actually go through a kind of blending where the Buddhist is supposed to realize that enlightenment has already happened, that reality is not really there, and that everything the Buddhist thought he knew about the world has become defunct. Now the task for the Buddhist is to remove the anxiety of living through this new perception of everything as unreal. Actually, since Nagarjuna, one of the thinkers of this period, suggested that there were two levels of truth, one had to come up with a flexibility of mind to move between the two realms realizing that the conventional realm was more facilely accepted and the recognition of the ultimate truth would require a form of letting go so that the Buddhist could practice his religion with some understanding that what he thinks he knows turns out to be a handful of dust.

If the situation for the Buddhist was vexing, western religions were more so. This emphasis on life as an illusion counters the western review of reality as something constructed for the benefit of mankind. The ubiquitous father figure of Christianity assured religionists a place of favor in life so long as they concerned themselves with his existence and tried desperately to connect with what they believe was God's plan for them. Just exactly why Christians want to develop a master/slave relationship with their ethereal parent is not clear to the outsider, since they hallow free will so much and yet they willingly give it up for a kind of merger with the plan God has for them, something

they have to divine in ways that are not clearly laid out. Whether or not they are ever acting under God's good graces remains a lifelong ambiguity. If the Buddhists made religion into a thing that looked like an erasure of the religious universe, the Christians were trying desperately to make sure they weren't playing make believe.

So the dichotomy between Buddhism and Christianity ran along this fault line between what it means to be a religious person. Many in the west would call Buddhism an atheistic religion since there is no God in their system, so if we remove God, can it be possible to call an atheistic religion a religion at all? Devotional practices are common in both Buddhism and Christianity, but the Christians, unlike the Buddhists, seem to know whom they are praying to. The Buddhists just chant with the monks to develop merit for the next life. But this idea of God that has plagued western thinking for untold centuries is a peculiarly western event. Even Chinese systems of thought, which I will touch on below, never really concerned themselves with a supernatural being who orders the universe and our very own lives. So why the fascination with something that cannot be seen, can only be a hope for its existence, and yet in the midst of all this uncertainty, they still want there to be a God whether He exists or not? Perhaps the makers of the biblical canon really made a good case. Since they put Jesus on the map, they haven't stopped building him into something more than just a man. The Gospel of John begins with the word, "In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. The Word was God." He goes on to say the Word was made flesh and contented itself to live as a human. The Gospel of John is keener than the other gospels that Jesus be God. It was perhaps one of the later gospels to be written, somewhere around 100 A.D. By this time, some of the debates in Christianity about the status of Jesus as divine had quelled enough

to elevate the humble teacher into God as we know him now. Debates like this would go on concerning Confucius too, but the boosters of him as a teacher would win out. The westerners seemed to need a God or else feel uncomfortable that their beliefs would be for naught. But we still see this stark difference between east and west and we are still met with the question of why there must be a God in the universe to have purpose in life.

It seems to be the case that people feel this need to form groups, and one of the most powerful grouping would occur in religious circles. Since there are billions of Christians on the one hand, and billions of Muslims on the other, we see that the world is practically God crazy. We seem to have this primal need to get others to agree with us. And raising the stakes about life such as saying that we cannot have anything like a life worth living kind of scares people into belief. What would the world be like without a God? Would there be wars and general lawlessness if people don't have sets of commandments telling them what to do? Well, despite all the goodwill that is supposed to result from all these billions of the faithful, we do have wars, murders committed in the US, supposedly a Christian nation, top the statistics every year. And a minority of Muslims wants to kill everyone who are infidels, meaning, anyone who isn't themselves a Muslim. Luckily the numbers of such groups has remained relatively small or else we'd really have a problem fending off a billion people. But the question about what the world would look like without a God is made more complicated by the way the world looks like with rampant belief in God. One would be hard pressed to imagine a difference. What's the use of a God who won't intervene when the world verges on the edge of destroying itself with even so many believers wanting God to be in his watching out for use? If God really intends for his children to be taken care of, but wants to do this

by people working things out for themselves, then we have a problem with what, exactly, is God's usefulness? Perhaps this is the question that Buddhists would ask themselves if someone in the sangha suddenly decided to open discussion on the viability of a God in their religion. With the westerners, we have a situation where they believe the world is constructed for their benefit, but easterners believe the world is illusion, and the evil we have in it is caused by selfish grasping onto phenomena they don't realize isn't really there. The monk who wants to talk about God may find himself lonely, because it just isn't in the nature of Buddhist teachings to move from nothing exists to the universe is filled with God's presence. The approach of Christianity and the approach of Buddhism just don't carry enough commonalities to see where along history they may have divided. Gods have always been a feature of western thinking while easterners see no point.

This difference on the possibility of God remains as a significant factor in any comparison we hope to undertake. The significance of this question on God seems like a cleavage that cannot be filled in except we examine some of the ways easterners and westerners approach problems in religion.

The idea of a God never really arose in Buddhism because the tradition the Buddha was working from had already made divinity problematic. Instead of worship, veneration became the watchword for the Buddhist. Since they take up the question of why reality is so deficient in a way that must include some understanding about what accounts for this deficiency, they were clearly focused on an explanation that would explain why people suffer, not whether there can be an overarching force in the universe that allows suffering. For them, suffering is simply a matter of the way things are. They were more interested in an explanation that accounted for this state of affairs, and thus

were not casting about for a supernaturally existent being who transcends the world for his very existence would be just an instantiation of magical thinking. The Buddha was interested in Right Thinking (as one step on the eightfold path), and this concept necessarily entailed an adjustment of perception where the problems of life can be dealt with through *seeing* things in a way that proves to be “right” or accurate according to the principles that have already been laid out.

We can see that the concern for thinking outweighed a concern for divining the mind of a God, which is something that religionists are forever trying to do. Western thinking was always about worrying their way into contact with this divine being and it seemed like the best way to achieve peace in life was through perceived contacts with the divine. But here we run into a thorny problem because the western way of approaching religious thinking always coalesced around this idea of knowing the will of God for them. How they can go about achieving this is where the problem lies.

Western religions cannot overcome their persistent thought that the universe is uniquely structured for their benefit. But as we have seen, if reality is any indicator of the kind of God we have, then we might want to resist the urge to conform the universe to our own preconceptions. But the religionist really is so invested in his program of belief, that he can think of no other way to approach the elements of his faith. Since having a good and omnipotent God has to be the first principle in his ruminations on the nature of reality, he has to restrict his thinking to what this God would want him to do, and for this he needs leaders to remind him that the path he is on is not imaginary, but exists as a real way to rejoin God in heaven. Preachers might be experts on what the Bible says, but

probably know no better than their own congregation what the meaning of the scripture is.

Ignorance seems to be a ruling principle in western religions, since they are not really invested in getting beyond their ordinary assumptions about the way religion works. If deep thinking is going on, it doesn't seem to arise in the majority view. The Buddhist has already accepted ignorance as the natural state of things, and doesn't reach for deeper understanding because quieting the mind is considered better than discovering the underpinnings of reality, primarily because reality doesn't really exist for them.

We have to remember that Buddhism was an Indian religion first, wanting to break down the ordinary assumptions of the Hindus. Once Buddhism began to spread, it developed other kinds of expression. By the time Buddhism reached China, Bodhidharma, who had meditated for nine years in front of a wall, brought a brand of Buddhism called Chan (Zen). This variation of Buddhism was started when the Buddha gave a sermon and one of his followers, Kasyapa, was the only one who understood what the Buddha meant when he ceased speaking for awhile and held up a single lotus flower. Kasyapa understood this to mean that all the words in the world were insufficient for reaching enlightenment. Kasyapa began to preach the doctrine of the response of silence. Now Bodhidharma took up the banner of this new doctrine and taught it to the Chinese who diversified Buddhism into several schools. But Chan was the denomination that captured the imagination of the Chinese and training for those who followed this path was to use meditation as the sole provider of salvation. They even experimented with burning books, since their hostility toward language grew into fanatical expressions. The response of silence meant that the Chan practitioner use his mind to solve little puzzles

called koans, which were meant to jolt the practitioner out of his mundane understanding of the world. These tended to be little paradoxes like, what is the sound of one hand clapping? Once the practitioner penetrated the true understanding of the koan, he could consider himself on the way to enlightenment. There would be little controversies like whether the enlightenment should come suddenly or gradually, but the sudden enlightenment believers won out and there are interesting stories of how some became enlightened. The Chan masters were severe and would punish their flock when they displayed ignorance. There is the story of a young disciple who, when cracked over the back with a stick, received his enlightenment from this single act. But Chan would whither in China and reach Japan, which is the form we now know as Zen. Japanese devotees would travel to China to receive training from the masters there, and so, in the beginning, Zen looked a lot like Chan. But there were innovations that would give it a particularly Japanese flavor as we now turn towards discussing another Chinese movement known as Taoism.

The most influential idea that the Taoists brought into being was the idea of nondoing, something continually stressed by Lao Tzu, the pseudonymous writer of the Tao Te Ching. Wing Tsit Chan likes to tone down the more mystical aspects of this idea by saying that nondoing really means acting in accord with nature. While this would be a big part of Taoism, this interpretation seems to be commenting on the broader dogmas of the religion. Other people were trying to find a way of interpreting nondoing as something that was related to doing without doing, a paradox that resolves itself into a kind of passivity toward living where harmony with nature is found in the mystical idea that doing something by itself was insufficient to capture the essence of living in a world

where actions are less important than submission. Submission to what comes as a natural question but the answer is found in the concept of doing without doing itself. But a crisis arose. The spread of Taoism became so all pervading that the rulers would simply and passively sit in their palaces stuck with the wrong headed idea that nondoing meant doing nothing at all, including governing. With the sudden lassitude of the princes and kings, the thing called The Mandate of Heaven and all its 10,000 things, shriveled like the balls of a swimmer in cold water, and things in society went into neglect.

All of one's being is involved in the propagation of good deeds, so submission to the will of the concept itself is a way to view nondoing as a guiding principle where the practitioner is expected to privilege withholding one's assent to the reality he lives in to the deeper forms of being that subsist on a more ineffable grasp of reality. If reality cannot really be understood, then the only way out of the paradox is to do without doing, which basically means to understand the world as a place where actions have no fruition but only block spiritual maturity.

Through these examples, we can see a certain complexity arising in eastern forms of spirituality. They wanted to understand the world as a place where easy answers have no place because only through understanding the tremendous depth in being can the religionist truly find himself reaching the necessary understanding to act ethically in the world. Christian ethics are always bounded by the system of beliefs that the religionist is supposed to practice. Since these ethical ways of living are so diverse, how can the religionist know he is on the correct path to understanding God? Actually, they really aren't really interested in this high understanding of God so much as understanding how to obey him, something complicated by the need for a leader to mediate this. The

spirituality of the leader is supposed to be superior to his flock, but just knowing how to quote scripture may not lead to the kind of wisdom the followers expect from him.

Perhaps a little discussion on wisdom would be in order here.

Knowledge and wisdom seem to go hand in hand, and they often do. But there is the story of Hui Neng, the fifth patriarch of Zen, who was an illiterate rice pounder who dictated a verse that was found to capture the essence of Zen better than any other of the students. He basically proved that one need not have knowledge to have great wisdom. Innate intelligence also gets thrown in the mix of what constitutes wisdom, but actually, the basis of wisdom, we can safely say, really comes from pain.

Someone who is tuned into the Buddha's message that life is suffering will have an easier time understanding why wisdom is related to pain. Life is just pain whether recognized or not, so the ability to cultivate wisdom comes as a natural consequence of understanding the necessity of reconciling nonbeing with the attributes of spirituality which report on the status of a reality that seeks to mislead the religionist into concrete thinking instead of the fluctuating under girders to what turns out to be an insufficient reality. Remember that the Buddhists are interested in removing suffering through stopping the constant grasping onto material things, so the Buddhist will likely find the beginnings of his spiritual practice as a facet of his interior life. The Buddhist will keep the idea of suffering in the forefront of his desire to release himself from the terrors of the world, but he has to do so in a climate where the source of his suffering is directly related to how he approaches his own spiritual liberation. He has to understand himself and his surroundings as things, which don't really exist, and as long as he persists in grasping behaviors, the more he is unable to remove the causes of suffering. It should be expected

that the average practitioner cannot successfully find his way into enlightenment. But, even in this context of difficulty, the expectation of gaining wisdom along the way ought to be high. This is because the practitioner is perpetually incompetent at his religion as he tries to do things that take a lifetime to do. The exceptional practitioner will be the one who receives his enlightenment, but everyone who successfully grasps the first principle of suffering is well on his way to discovering wisdom. Perhaps Buddhism is superior to western ways of thinking because the westerner understands wisdom as something that is conferred by God through living a successful life, the meaning of which hangs in murky territory. Guessing that one is being successful becomes the problem that westerners confront, since the nature of their success is a measuring stick that no one can see, let alone effectively use as a method of understanding their own place in the universe. The westerner really has a deficient view on what it means to have wisdom.

This being said, we can add the group of free thinkers whether they be agnostics or atheists or simply disinterested in religion, and we can see that the variety of approaches to understanding one's place in the universe is multiple. Because, in the west, the yardstick for success is often thought of in monetary terms, they really sublimate the suffering in their lives by giving themselves over to the pursuit of wealth. This form of grasping acts as a kind of panacea for the westerner to feel happy about his life even though he may be a religious person with spiritual leanings, but these are insufficient to inculcate the kind of personal power that comes with contacting wisdom.

Knowledge and life experiences contribute to the recognition of a kind of intelligence that leads to the acquisition of wisdom, and in the case of Hui Neng we saw that knowledge itself is not the sole arbiter to religious understanding. But the piquant

understanding of life as suffering leads to the kind of spirituality that is sufficient for deeper understanding. Suffering, we might say, is the real edifice upon which wisdom stands.

Everyone, to some degree or another, is possessed of a psychologically damaged self that fills the human personality with the dross of a life lived with bad memories, mistakes, and bad treatment from family and friends, that can either be seen as a hindrance to acquiring deeper understanding or as a catalyst for helping the individual see his worth as a form of transcending his bad circumstances. Some people are started on the path of life with tremendous burdens such as a childhood of abuse or incompetent parents who did nothing to further positive self-esteem. But some will not use this bad start as a deformation of life but as a way of contacting the resources of strength that make them successful despite these disabilities. The ability to take control of one's own life, to take responsibility for one's own actions makes this psychologically damaged self a source of unimaginable insights. The particularly sensitive soul will be able to use this checkered past as a guide to uncovering meaning in life he wouldn't be able access without these forms of blockages he has now understood as puzzles to untangle in a quest for meaning. And it is in the quest for meaning that wisdom can be found.

Pairing meaning with wisdom means that the nature of existence makes wisdom a natural outcome of figuring out one's own identity, which necessarily compels the seeker of wisdom to understand his desire for it and his ability to make sense of the world as two parts of the same procedure for discovering the deeper well from which wisdom springs. Individuals are inherently innocent. They aren't expected to apprehend everything about the world because that would be impossible given the universe's insistence on not

revealing itself in ready-made forms. It is enough to discover who one is and what one's role in his self-made life he is expected to play. With a firm grasp of selfhood, and a willingness to perceive the psychologically damaged self as a source of intimate knowledge that adds to the identity the individual wants to build, it is enough to penetrate the murky depths of the self to see what there is to behold. It is like a giant mirror that reflects a deformed image the individual can reconstruct in fulfilling ways. Wisdom, then, becomes the result, not of an acquisition of things, as if knowledge were merely a compilation of disconnected facts, but as a confrontation with the universe's desire to impede the self from comprehending his own true nature. Hegel once called this the fight to the death with the Other where resolution sets up a master/slave dialectic with the slave accepting unhappy consciousness as the reward for his defeat. But we can read Hegel a different way and suggest that the fight to the death actually makes defeat a desired condition since the slave's sense of himself is a condition to explore the facets of his newly created being-ness that wants to grow beyond the narrow parameter of his unhappiness in order to produce an unlikely metaphor: the defeat as creation. The slave is positioned to create a new mode of life since his diminished position actually acts as a form of creationism. In the midst of this search comes a reason for the defeat as the result of divine providence.

Trying to say that people are where they are because they are supposed to be there may sound like a form of determinism, but actually, what it means is that the person is in a unique position to create his own life because most people fail the Hegelian litmus test and so the slave position becomes a natural part of reality that the person must use as a way to navigate through their conundrums and dilemmas. Wisdom is found in this battle

to realize the true nature of consciousness for the individual and, if reality is nothing, then the tremendous capacity for creating one's life ex nihilo becomes a daily event. The quest for wisdom is the same as figuring out one's life circumstances in the context of wresting meaning away from the forces that plunge one into a perpetual state of ignorance. Understanding that one cannot reach a sense of wisdom except the fetters of suffering and ignorance are resolved as illusions that can be penetrated through the task of understanding one's own place in the universe, something that is made more possible with the understanding that suffering itself is the beginning of wisdom. Then, no matter how much we are caught in the web of illusions, the reality we have can pass away with the diligent attempt to plumb the depths of one's own damaged psyche.

The persistence of a path to wisdom can be found catalogued in the individual's own life experiences so long as those experiences find an interpretive opening that the individual can access through his own understanding of what his life means. But there is a complication. The individual's access level to the meaning of his own life can also be impeded by the psychologically damaged self since its influence can either consciously or unconsciously feed the individual tainted information if the individual cannot reach a situation of self-awareness that allows him to cull through the various images he encounters in a way that is part of a positive discrimination process or a negative one. One's existential fears of being wrong about one's decisions in life can gain ascendancy in the consciousness and the influence of the damaged psyche becomes harmful. So, how do we assess the individual's confrontation with his own inner demons as a wrestling match won or lost?

This is the other side of the psychologically damaged self and that is its strength to overrule any positive input the individual might be capable of uncovering. It seems the psychologically damaged self is a two-edged sword, making coming to proper conclusions a challenge. So if the very thing that helps to produce wisdom is also an instrument of self-destruction, we have to tread carefully, and even consider the idea that distinguishing between helpful and hurtful information becomes so muddy that the idea of actually being successful in a probe for wisdom almost seems impossible. So there we have it. The very thing that assists us in our search is the very thing that puts up blockades as well. This leads us to the very real question: is wisdom a real world possibility or not?

The idea that wisdom exists but we are virtually incapable of discovering it may seem like a form of nihilism. Can we have meaning in life without the support of wise intuitions to support it? Could it be possible to live a meaningful life without wisdom? In other words, is the concept of wisdom a reality or does our sense of how we regard intelligence just make it seem so?

The fact that we pair wisdom and intelligence can break down a distinction between the two. But it may be important to keep the two concepts separate. We have to factor in the added problem that wisdom may be illusory and if intelligence becomes our only measure of a meaningful life, then we are playing a game that only the elite can win. Just as philosophizing was made possible by the rise of luxury, so too does time for spiritual contemplation become the province of the rich and famous. We hear people like Madonna proudly announce that she studies Cabbala, but she only cheapens it when, in a photo, she sported a t-shirt that said, "Cabbalists do it better." We have to wonder about

the faddishness of certain Hollywood pre-occupations because, between movies, albums, or on hiatuses from TV shows, they truly have time on their hands, and feeling superior perhaps as a direct result of their success, they proclaim themselves experts on spiritual matters too even though they really have no expertise besides their own sense of self-importance. Take Richard Gere's fascination with the Dalai Lama. It seems that wherever His Holiness lectured, one could find Gere as if playing a Where's Waldo game. I'm sure they're sincere in their pursuit of things they think they are more qualified than others surely by virtue of their station, but the degeneration of religious proclivities into smoke and mirrors diminishes the authenticity of their approach. They are practicing a kind of religious discipline, but just how seriously they take it may be revealed in the attitude of superiority they feign on talk shows, like when Oprah Winfrey likes to think that she has her finger on the pulse of the universe. But ironically, despite the hubris that often appears in her own estimation of her spirituality, we can safely say that, through openly speaking about her childhood abuse, she does seem to possess something akin to wisdom. She has successfully tapped into her suffering in a way that has had positive effects on her life. But we have to remain skeptical about our decision to label what she has "wisdom" when a certain kind of emotional intelligence could also be an explanation. This inability to clearly identify the difference between a kind of intelligence and "wisdom" leads us to a discussion on the role of intelligence in the pursuit of the perhaps illusory concept of wisdom.

There are many ways to regard intelligence since its expressions are multiple. There is such a thing as kinesthetic intelligence as we would find in dancers or martial artists. There is intrapersonal intelligence where people are good at dealing with other

people. And we have savants who could do complex mathematical equations in seconds, some of them having eidetic memories (my own nephew, Kyle is also one such person). I mentioned that recently researchers have labeled a kind of intelligence as emotional intelligence and this is the kind of intelligence that masquerades as wisdom most potentially. People with great emotional intelligence perhaps have done a better job than the rest of us at defeating their inner demons. But wisdom actually requires more from us. The reason it is such a contentious concept lies in its elusiveness of definition and the ability to recognize it when we see it. What is wisdom after all but a way of grasping the nature of virtually inexpressible intuitions on the meaning of life?

So we wind up imprisoned in a difficulty that seems to have no out. If we pair wisdom with intelligence, then the ability to truly recognize wisdom as a separate idea from intelligence gets wiped out. Yet there seems no distinguishing wisdom from intelligence because wisdom is so overshadowed by our understanding of what intelligence is. How do we get out of the conundrum of discovering wisdom given its indefinite status as a real concept?

Like wisdom, truth lies in the shadows. To get at the truth of something is perpetually to seek something that does not yield its fruits easily. Perhaps wisdom can be understood in the same way. We have to form a facility for *recognizing* wisdom when we encounter it, knowing at the same time, that what we perceive is forever tainted by the doubt that plagues us concerning its real world ability to appear.

Westerners and Easterners alike will have this confusion over the recognition of wisdom the more it becomes doubtful as a true concept at all. If we follow the Easterners line of thinking, since everything is an illusion, there may be no need for wisdom since

even that would be an expression of the reality that isn't there. In this case, the only role for wisdom is confirming one's own status as a non-existent being, and once having grasped this, wisdom emerges in the accomplishment of such a task. But this gives a very tenuous definition of wisdom, since it doesn't accomplish anything in an illusory world, so the recognition of nonbeing is just part of the path the individual is on. We can say that wisdom is embedded in the very fabric of the universe, making everything an expression of wisdom preserving and deleting the concept at the same time as a consequence of Sunyata. Westerners will want to label things wise even though they cannot disentangle this from intelligence. So we see that the only way to regard wisdom is as a thing we can recognize upon a skeptical stance that we can really have no recognition at all. Perhaps this is a complicated argument, but it is meant to be. The shadowy existence of wisdom is a marker of just how prepared we are to accept that everything we thought we knew about reality is mere chimera. Thus, the idea that one can accumulate wisdom is so wrong-headed that the individual who believes he possesses more or less of it is doomed to a life of delusion. The west and the east must cooperate on the fundamentals of really existent things in order for there to be a helpful spiritual base at all. Such a thing perhaps cannot be accomplished because their difference from each other is too stark for a proper dialogue. So there is only the hope for wisdom, something we can perhaps never know is really there, but doesn't diminish the search for it nonetheless. Such is the peculiarity of the abysmal lives we lead. How to have happiness in a world of illusions becomes the task of any spiritually interested individual.

The Peter Problem

A man lies dying on his bed. His family is gathered around and since the man is near death, a priest is called for. As the black-frosted priest bends over the deathbed, the man whispers his last confession into the priest's ear. This confession is not just filled with a bunch of minor sins, like mistreating his wife and kids, which he has done, but also includes the confession of a murder. Just before the man expires, the priest absolves him of his sins and thus concludes the life of not just a miscreant but someone who has done rather awful things. Does this person get to go to heaven?

The deathbed confession is something that Catholics believe in, but does the confession of sin at the conclusion of life still merit absolution? In other words, can a moment of instant faith be enough to propel someone from a sure trip to hell to a rather shaky ride into heaven? This seems to be something of a problem for the boosters of the view that one needs to live a completely moral life in order to reach God's abode. But let's say that the moments leading up to the man's death have been a painstaking reexamination of his life and the ineluctable conclusion he draws is that the path of faith is indeed available for his entry even at this late time. In other words, it may be impossible to tell just how sincere his confession is except, of course, God. And yet despite the fact that his faith is real and his confessions the result of spiritual enlightenment, the unease that someone can arrive at this conclusion at death will unsettle some. The events leading to his conversion just prior to his arrival in belief may have started way back in the midst of his sinful life but doesn't manifest itself until this late hour. Since I have already suggested that the very concept of judgment doesn't hold water, no matter who is doing the judging, then who are we to judge after all? But there

are several problems with deciding just who gets to go to heaven and who are condemned to hell.

One apocryphal story has to do with the apostle Peter. There are those who believe that he waits at heaven's gates checking those who wish entry for the proper prerequisites, like leading a good and moral life, a life that has been filled with the worship of God, and a dedication to the fundamentals of his or her particular religion. But what kind of checklist would Peter have? For instance, since he was a follower of Jesus, does he expect those who get in to have a dedication to Jesus, or does he have some leeway considering that there are many (many billions in fact) who never knew of Jesus, but were dedicated to living a moral life? Peter's problem is this. Since he was a devoted follower of Jesus, would he be biased in favor of those who believe that only Jesus saves, and therefore has to assign everyone who is Jesus-less to an eternity in hell? Does this mean that Gandhi has to burn?

The problem Peter has lies in the criteria he uses for admittance. Obviously, the Christians would expect Peter to be completely one dimensional on this issue. Only those who proclaim that Jesus has saved them may enter the pearly gates. So no matter how righteous the person is who comes before Peter's desk, without the saving power of Jesus to back them up, that person is condemned. In this case, Peter doesn't have to think very much. He just has to make sure that people have been sincerely converted and check off the box marked "saved" and the person is granted admittance. But just how saved does one have to be? Does someone who has led an exemplary life as opposed to our recent convert on the deathbed have an easier time with Peter, or is the only criterion that one simply believe in Jesus, and he doesn't have to examine the soul any more

deeply than that? How do we know if we are acting in a way that will gain us entry into heaven? How slovenly can we be about our lives just because we can claim that we are “saved?”

This dilemma comes down to the now famous grace versus works debate. Catholics have always weighted their belief system on the side of meriting heaven. Even if one works very hard, going to church, confession, and praying very much, the jury is still very much out on whether or not they get to go to heaven. The most they can hope for is a short time in purgatory, a place where sins are “purged,” before they can expect to enter the pearly gates. The Protestants are more heavily weighted on the grace option. Luther believed that absolutely everything, including good works, were mortal sins. There is nothing at all that the individual can do to merit heaven, it seems that God simply has to like you enough in order to gain entry. Edwards put this in very graphic terms in his famous sermon, “The Life of a Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God.” He preached in a very fire and brimstone style. According to him, we dangle like spiders over an open flame with God holding us in his hand where we roast, feeling the heat of damnation for the whole of our lives, and it is only because of God’s grace that He doesn’t peel back his fingers and let us be burned up. Protestants believe that it is through grace alone that one can be saved.

This idea seems to have filtered down to modern evangelicals who believe that the confession of Christ as one’s savior can be enough for the individual to pass Peter’s test. This isn’t license to go out and live a life of lassitude because the expectation is that once converted, the individual will sort of fall into a kind of lifestyle that will make them a good witness to others. The mania to convert begins because without the saving

experience, the expectation can only be hell. In fact, there are many people who believe that Gandhi will indeed go to hell, because he hasn't confessed Jesus as his savior.

Didn't Jesus himself say that the way to God is straight and narrow, after all? Christians expect that most of their neighbors are condemned because they don't have the right spiritual equipment. And since there are so many ways to fall off the path, or not even to find it, we once again have to proclaim that hell is indeed bigger than heaven.

Calvin and his doctrine of predestination further complicate the story. According to him, the whole question of heaven and hell is worked out ahead of time, before any of us were ever born. Some were simply selected to go to heaven and their reward or to hell and their damnation not based on anything they did or didn't do, but simply because God's plan was ordered in a way that provided for the decision to take place in some prior form of assignation. In this case, there is only the anxiety of where one will wake up after death, be it heaven or hell. This doctrine had such strong implications that a civil war over it nearly broke out in the seventeenth century.

This seems to beg the question of whether we really have any choice in where we end up. Perhaps the whole question of religion boils down to resignation. Maybe the whole point is to simply get God to like us. Perhaps this was a friendship that occurred before we were born or maybe we can curry favor while we're alive, but the question of where we go may be just beyond our reach. We won't know whether to pack our suntan lotion in the glory of the paradisiacal sun or to pack our Bactine in preparation for a very painful rest of time (meaning for the end of time of which there is none), we simply just spend our lives waiting. After all, our period on this earth is very short. It seems like a lot to ask to resolve every question on our worthiness to stand before God in such a

short time frame. The whole problem hinges on our anxiety about the question. There seems something very deep rooted in us that longs to know the status of our soul before it becomes too late, like our man on the deathbed, wondering if a life of crime can be forgiven in one epiphanic moment. The drive to know our fate before it becomes too late has us fishing around for glimpses of God as if he were some kind of narcotic we constantly jones for. But what is the point of forgiveness if it can't be applied in a way that can be felt by the one who has sinned?

Forgiveness does seem to fly below the radar screen most of the time. In the New Testament, Peter was apparently forgiven for denying that he knew Jesus three times while Judas' crime became the focus of revile for centuries. And those of us who commit very minor crimes are just as much in the dark. We certainly can't feel forgiveness in the confines of an emotion although there are those who think they can. Even during Jesus' time, Jesus had to tell the people he was forgiving that they were "forgiven." The woman who was almost stoned by the mob for the crime of adultery hung around until he told her to go and sin no more. But without this verbal assurance by someone authorized to act on behalf of God, we feel completely bereft. Feeling forgiven may just be impossible, an empty category. Jesus assures us at one point that we will be well taken care of in this life, that if we should knock, it shall be opened to us. So does this mean that the request for forgiveness will be honored in an opportunistic way? The only problem lies in coming to a certainty that the forgiveness has been accomplished. It's like a soap bubble that we can produce with our breath but then extinguishes in the air because it is too weak to maintain itself. The offer of forgiveness is there, but applying it as a true principle dissipates in the rarefied air of spirituality.

But spirituality is something that is supposed to be beyond human physiology. People imagine that their emotions are reporting something to them that has come from a supernatural source. The only problem is determining where the “bridge” is that spans the gulf between supernatural and human experience. People usually believe that, since the soul is located within the confines of the skin, there is some sort of umbilical relationship between spiritual experience and emotional experience. If one should sin, the effects are harmful to the indwelling soul, and if one receives blessings, the soul is automatically enlarged. But there remains a basic paradox between the vocalization of the soul’s experiences and the ineffable touch of God’s communication. If someone were to report to us that they have literally heard the voice of God we might be inclined to refer them to a psychiatrist. So again, we have to paradoxically translate the voice of God in the whisperings of his subtle mouth to our human one, which is only capable of vocalizing itself through biological participation. This would seem to suggest that spiritual experience is in some empirical way part of human experience, that God can be both sublime and obvious at the same time. He reveals himself sometimes and conceals himself at others. The odd man out in this scenario is forgiveness. Since people rarely feel forgiven, it is hard to explain its absence.

It seems like the best course of action is to give up on feeling forgiveness and just start making assumptions. Assume that if you have repented sufficiently, then forgiveness will come naturally, somewhat like a mathematical formula. If I do a, then b will naturally follow. Unfortunately, assumptions can often lead to false conclusions, since spiritual experience is nothing like a problem of logic. What if we spend a lifetime making the sort of assumptions that we have received our forgiveness for our

wrongdoings when, as we stand intrepidly before Peter, we are told that none of the conditions of repentance have been satisfied? The problem seems to be one of knowing.

Knowledge of facts is different from knowledge of ethereal phenomena. The scientific method gives a clear-cut way to verify if our hypothesis has been correct or not. But then, even rigorous experimentation can lead to disproving the previous assumption about our data. In fact, this ability of scientific hypotheses to be falsifiable is even desirable. If theories were incapable of being improved upon, then they would resemble hard facts. And whether or not facts can ever be “hard” becomes a problem as well. With so much ambiguity floating around even the “hard” sciences, just how to establish facts about spiritual realities can seem like an insurmountable task.

Even whether or not we can use the word “fact” about spiritual things is something we have to consider carefully. For instance, is there one spiritual reality or many? Can these realities be known with the human senses, even if we expand the notion of the senses to include extra-sensory premonitions?

People will rely on the ability to sense spiritual realities by way of something I have labeled the “spiritual sensory program.” This means that the way to feel in contact with something greater than oneself is predicated on a sort of alternate human experience continuum that evades normal sensing patterns, but still exists in the human body as a way of telling the difference between a spiritual experience and a sensory experience. It is interesting that people seem to find their experiences familiar, as if there were a context for the experience when there really is none. Perhaps this is why the most popular way of knowing that one is under the favor of God is by experiencing non-coincidental coincidences. This means that there will be events that go on, like getting a favored job

after one has prayed about it, seeming to spin out of thin air. These kinds of experiences make the individual believe that he is receiving the blessings he is destined to receive and that there is nothing so wonderful as believing he is on a path created by God himself. The only problem is that even bad people get what they want, which is what Jesus said would happen when he talked about the rain falling on the righteous and the wicked alike. God will probably help everyone whether they want to be helped or not because it seems to be God's nature to use success as a reward. But what happens to the people who don't have the same luck? We've all seen the homeless people on the side of the road; we hear about people losing their houses through foreclosure, and that there are plenty of people who want work but can't find it. Is the judgment of God on these people to such an extent that they can find no notion of peace at all?

It seems like the principle of karma has both eastern and western ramifications. Christians would tend to feel like these people who don't fall under God's favor are doing something wrong; that there is some flaw in their lifestyle that leads to these trying circumstances. The belief in reincarnation often presents this dilemma of why some are blessed and others are not as a result of a life lived badly in a former incarnation placing them in unfavorable conditions. Both Christians and Buddhists seem inured to the idea that people get what they deserve. Karma produces attitudes in people that leads to a sort of lassitude on the part of more successful people who become less inclined to help those they have judged as less deserving of help because they somehow merited their situation. Christian charity, then, starts to resemble a largesse born out a privileged position, since the Christian knows he is saved and the unfortunate ones who need the help are receiving it from the Christian because the Christian "deigns" to give it. Christians would tend to

view social stratification as a form of determinism, and that the way things are is the way things are supposed to be. There have to be the blessed and the unblessed in order to create a universe where the cosmic scales always reward and punish because the universe is simply designed to operate that way. But do we have to accept this point of view on the universe? Are the spiritual laws that govern us really set up to create an oppositional scenario where there has to be inequity in order to seem some saved and some damned in order to have order in the universe?

This desire to elevate justice to the status of a universal law actually joins human society and the putative holy one together into a whole that does not exist. What this view actually does is to create indifference in the people who believe in the oppositional necessity of the universe being classed in this way. What really needs questioning is the very structure of the society that would allow this kind of inequity, and not the false largesse of the blessed who have to make room in their calendars to visit the local soup kitchen. But Christians tend to be very conservative. They think that it is enough for a society to be democratic in order for that society to be a good one. They don't face the questions of whether their idea of society is a correct one because they believe that people smarter than them have already solved the question of what constitutes a society that is supposed to maximize freedom even when that ideal is not enough to remove the severe consequences of social stratification. What ends up happening is that a distinction between communist societies and democratic societies surfaces. And even though this is a false distinction, since these are not the only two options that people have to choose from, people allow all kinds of abominable practices because the structure of their society is assumed to be the best of all possible societies. The problem is one of inertia. Since

the people who are smarter than us have already resolved the question of what constitutes a good society, thought stops and creativity on the role of a society to provide for its citizens sinks in a mire contained in the phrase “this must be the best possible solution for justice to be accomplished.”

The problem with the attitude that justice has already fit into a nice category by virtue of our reasoning it to be thus is the fact that what we do with our lives has very little to do with an abstract sense of how the universe works. People actually seem to enjoy dancing on the graves of people they simply disliked when they were alive. This emotive self-laceration is the real and hidden opinion on the purpose of justice. People just dreamily wander in the shit hole that is their lives, waiting for God to knock off the people they hate just so they can perform a Gregory Hines. The universal idea of overcoming the tap dancers is viewing death as a garbage disposal, that, while reading an obituary, and there seems to be a huge fascination doing this, they exult in this personification of erasure, a phenomenon swimming out of the primordial ooze customarily reserved for the subconscious now a perpetuation of insanity that says the reality people perceive about the application of justice is really wearing a mask like at a ball where the dancing metaphorizes justice in a place where perception and reality meet.

People aren't using the principle of justice as a tool in their daily living but simply trying to follow simple rules. The Ten Commandments seem like enough of a duty to work out and nothing in the program of religions, unless you are a mystic, requires anything more from you than understanding what the commandments are and then following them. Despite the fact that the commandments are fairly obvious, that following ethical rules will lead to a more promising life, the religionist will feel that

following these rules, however simple, is something that carries favor with God. Every time a commandment is kept, the religionist will feel that they are one step closer to gaining heaven. So some religions will add commandments just to give the sense that the advantage will tilt even further in the proper direction with even more rules to follow. As long as this rule following behavior seems efficacious for the religionist, they won't have a need to consider the broader implications of what the rules may actually mean in the overall structure of the way the universe works. Spiritual realities seem so disconnected from physical ones that never the twain shall meet, or so it seems. Despite the fact that the religionist is basing their rule following behavior exactly on their notion of a universal structure, the lack of dependency on this overarching idea will only lead to an unnoticed inconsistency. Are spiritual realities really so overtly structured to reward rule following behavior over more sedate approaches, like the Buddhists who sit in zazen and try to build compassion?

We can't really know the answer to the question because to do so would be to know the mind of God. But does it seem reasonable that there could only be one approach to living a religious life? The people who don't care about the rules (as long as they aren't killing people or something) are usually doing fairly harmless things but they are thought to be under some kind of condemnation because their indifference is counted as a sin. We are supposed to care about the rules as much as we care about our own souls. In fact, rule following behavior gets so intimately connected with the status of the soul that indifference to it gets perceived as a sure way to damn oneself.

Is the only way out of the conundrum to pitch oneself into atheism? Part of the problem with atheism (as we will be discussing later on) is that it is often unable to

distinguish between disbelieving in the things human beings have said about God and sensible approaches to leading a spiritual life that require some original thinking.

Because atheists are convinced that human beings are wrong about God, they believe that the very possibility of there being a God in the universe is equally invalid. The fact is, they don't know any better than anyone else does about the truth of spiritual reality, but because they find the idea of God so unreasonable, they commit to a way of thinking that excludes everything extra-sensory. And they wrongly think that they are a tiny minority.

Actually, although most people say they believe in God, their actions betray what their mouths are saying. If people really cared about living a moral life to the extent that they wished to, they wouldn't be doing things that land them in statistical hell. Since the numbers of people who cheat on their spouses are staggering and the divorce rate decimates at least half of all marriages, the commitment to God does not surface in their morality. The sins they commit morph into mistakes and the repentance they practice can put to rest almost any doubt they have about their status before God. Ted Haggard is a good example of this. He was a powerful preacher who had to admit to having homosexual affairs after the person he was having sex with went public. Even though he is probably a gay man, he consistently insists that he isn't, and he wants to suppress that side of himself in the name of following the official religious line that homosexuality is sinful, and therefore one must reform if one is having such thoughts or behaviors. The consequence of many Christian approaches is that it leads to a denial of one's own humanity. Flaws are perceived as sins, and if they are ineradicable, like homosexuality, then the person has no chance to win heaven. Since they can't change who they are, hell houses the people who can't deny who they are, and anyone who doesn't struggle with

himself as if he were his own worst enemy is deluding himself into believing that he has any chance of salvation at all.

If salvation seems to hinge on denying one's own humanity, how are we supposed to be happy? Would Peter have to only admit those who can demonstrate that they are constantly warring with their own personalities? The Peter problem vexes humanity with a choice between following a path of extreme denial or risk non-entrance into heaven because one has simply accepted the inevitable, that we can't change who we are so we are assured failing Peter's test even if we are a committed Christian. The fact that there are so few who can actually lead a virtuous life means that the narrow borders of salvation constrict into a tangled noose.

But before we jump from the rafters, we should examine whether or not the thing we are trying to escape is really not going to follow us into the afterlife. Suicide is usually considered a great sin, since one is actually committing a form of murder. But the notion of justice that supports the condemnation of the self-murderer assumes a lot about the circumstances that led to the act. Most people who get to the brink and are unable to go through with it often flinch because a singular moment of clarity has broken through like a revelation. That revelation is the realization that the products of the mind that afflicted them in their homicidal rage have a particular flaw. These "products" are a particular kind of deception that the hell they are surely damning themselves to may not eradicate the problems at all, since problems of this sort are always mental. And if the spirit is the bearer of everything we are in this life, then how exactly to shed all the negative things and still retain the positive ones is a conundrum that bears further comment.

People often believe that their entire personalities will survive intact once death has transformed them into purely spiritual beings. The common belief is that the self a person possesses will be exactly the same self that shows up before Peter's desk. But philosopher's have been struggling with even a simple definition of the self for centuries, so it might be difficult to make a blanket statement like the "I" I take myself to be will be the same "I" that transforms into a spiritual being. Bundle theories of the self suggest that the "I" is just a bundle of narrative strands the self coordinates in a way to present the appearance of a stable identity when the truth is, the self may just be a fiction the circularly revolving narratives within project onto the objective world in a way that deceptively maintains a sense of stability that can never be. People are as much defined by what they believe about themselves as they are by the people who are left to interpret their behavior in a way that makes the individual seem to be exactly as they take themselves to be. The fact that people are often blind to certain aspects of their personalities means that self-awareness is something beyond the reach of most people. And not only that, but the fact that this form of blindness exists suggests that the idea of a center to the self is the only place in the maze of the personality that individuals can be. Hence the common idiom of calling people "self-centered." We never really know ourselves from what might be called a God's eye view, or even anything resembling a knowable perspective because the person I am doesn't have a prayer of being unraveled from the dozens of plots and subplots that compose my personality. The bundles comprising the self are so entangled that there isn't any way to get at the core truth, since there really isn't one.

What then survives death? If anything emerges out of the human prison, it would have to be something essential, something that allows the individual to label himself as the person he thinks he knows. It is no longer clear that there would be a taut connection between the earthly self and the spiritual self since there is nothing essential about my being the same person in this ethereal sphere. It is not even clear that I know who I am from one moment to the next without feedback from other people that I am performing in a consistent manner. If I am a person given to a lot of self-talk, I might experience a certain amount of vertigo all the time that there are perhaps two consciousnesses operating in the same mind at the same time. This is sometimes known as met consciousness, where the abstraction of a mental thought further abstracts until a certain feature of thinking becomes a disembodied voice the person feels the need to respond to as if that consciousness were an objective thing. The thing that survives death may then said to be dual; a thing that is essentially me in the sense that there is self-recognition of who I have always taken myself to be and the me who is not really a me at all but a coordinated matrix of possible me's all fighting for recognition in an ethereal state that doesn't really have solid boundaries in the same way the earthly self does. There are probably no mirrors in heaven because people may be horrified by what stares back at them. This situation exists because of the tenuous nature of the physical self and the releasing of the inner contents of a mind that can no longer hold back its "holes" in the presumptive identity come to fruition in the transformative experience of dying. This discussion of course assumes that there is anything to survive death, as there are a healthy number of people who believe that there is no soul to escape into the ethereal realm. How do we assuage the assumptions of the skeptics on soul survival without razing the

edifice of spiritual experience itself? Certainly the inveterate nonbelievers will never consent to anything like a soul survival at all, but we have to be sensitive to their argument that the personality just evaporates at death because this is a possible outcome as well. The paucity of information on crossing over makes most of what has gone before seem like rank speculation. Can reason really get us to a place where we can have at least some idea of soul survival?

The cherished opinions of religionists frame the Peter problem in somewhat unambiguous terms, since it is their closely held belief that time is a chronological clock that will continue to tick down the seconds even in an eternal environment. But if we admit that there are some forms of continuance that have nothing to do with the religionist's linear clock, then we have to conceive of time and space in a different way. The very idea that there are criteria for entrance into heaven seems to be tragicomic in the sense that the principle of exclusion would reach absurd heights. Add to this the commonsense notion that the self is a static entity with no signs of change even once the individual crosses over into the afterlife and having anything like a logical conclusion to the Peter problem becomes more and more ridiculous. Religionists have never been big on the rational program, preferring intuitive reactions to their sense of what constitutes reality. Since the religionist is inured to a commonsense notion of what reality is, the dilemmas of discovering a canonical reality among the constructed ones does not penetrate. People just seem to assume that they are in contact with the Real and any other speculation is just the philosopher playing with concepts again. Mystics may feel that the Real is something ineffable, and it is only with a rigorous devotion to a spiritual life that swerves from the course of the immediately religious that places them in a realm where

discipline means forceful and maniacal renunciation that the Real can be uncovered in the miasma of speculative exercises. But most people want to be content with their existing spiritual paths, so the mystic's intuition of something greater than the perceived reality gets rejected because the form of pastoral care they experience assures them that they need do nothing more than ramp up their rule following behavior in order to win heaven.

This fact that there may be a tension between the Real at the commonsense level and a Real that only a mystical program can reveal largely goes unrecognized because people feel that there is a canonical reality at the level of individual experience. The supernatural realm, which is presupposed by Christian doctrine, is deemed to interact with the natural world in a way that calms fears about ending up in hell because the commonsense notion of this divine pairing between heaven and hell is just assumed as foundational knowledge in the mind of the religionist. But following a spiritual path requires a commitment to living in a certain way as we have discussed, so those who either never find the path or those who stray from it are assured a complete failure of Peter's evaluation. But we still have the criteria of entering heaven to contend with.

Eternal punishment seems like a particular revenge on the people whom the religionist deems unworthy to share the same heavenly soil. The last book of the Bible, namely Revelation, has sometimes been called Christian pornography because the imagery is so viciously portrayed. Perhaps the book was written at a time when Christians were feeling overly persecuted for their steadfast devotion. During the time of the early Christian's persecutions from the Romans, the expectation was to refrain from rejecting their belief in Jesus since, for some reason really unknown, they felt that being tortured and eaten by lions was more favorable than denying their belief system. This

seems like a particularly unwise position because Peter, after all, denied Jesus three times in order to avoid death, so why the early Christians preferred martyrdom to survival when the simple utterance of words rejecting what their hearts still steadfastly believed is something of a puzzle. After all, the more the ranks of the Christians were decimated by martyrdom, the less likely the survival of the whole community was possible. If all the Christians had been rounded up and this same ethic of nondenial held, then the sect of Christianity would extinguish and the logic of the martyrs would seem even more counterintuitive. This level of persecution is probably what led the writer of Revelation to fill his book with vitriol since the need for justice for the blood of the fallen would seem to impel the writer to exotic needs for revenge. The Book of Revelation seems to be a diatribe on the whole human race as fodder for God's ultimate judgment, something that would inevitably be very bad.

But the notion of the apocalypse, something proposed in Revelation, has plagued Christianity from its humble beginnings, but when Christ's return grew farther and farther removed from their own historical circumstances, the problem of evil developed a weight on the Christian's shoulders. For one thing, why wasn't evil eradicated once Jesus died on the cross? Shouldn't there have been a remission from the buffetings of Satan then, right at the completion of Jesus' mission? The fact that the opposite was true, that the world grew even more capable of violence, even inventing a new form of violence called genocide, how exactly, did Jesus succeed?

The answer comes in at the level of the individual who now has to face all the evils in the world alone. Not even the protection of the church was adequate since the corruption that followed it into later dates still imperiled individual survival, e.g., the

inquisition. People seemed more bereft after Christ's death than ever before, and the assurance of a second coming began to wane the longer Jesus stayed in his heaven and refused to rescue his people. Thus, the individual is faced with either conforming to his church's standards and theology or else find a different method for currying God's favor, something that really wasn't an option until very late dates and centuries later. The individual who seeks to pursue a method of spirituality on his own does not have the protection of baptism and other sacraments designed to routinize soteriological principles, so his advantageous independence becomes more of a liability. Staying out of hell, as the preoccupation of those gathered into churches, subjugates independent thought since it is the confession of faith that matters, not the teasing out of speculations within a universe of possible religious thought. But we are all private communists. We want everyone to agree with how we think as if to believe in some variant of the dogma were a stigma. Recently, a cardinal in the Catholic published a statement condemning the Protestants for being totally and utterly wrong. In the Mormon church, a leader named Bruce R. McConkie had to be quieted for calling the Catholic church the whore of the earth. So interfaith dialogue always seems to end in an exclusionary tone, which, as I have already stated, is the worst possible position because there are simply too many ways to be wrong about one's religious beliefs. Even within any particular church, perfect adherence is practically impossible, so doom and gloom become a cloud religionist's seem always to be under.

Besides, the universe may not even be constructed to reveal the meaning of life since access is simply blunted. We naturally assume that whether or not there is a God who reveals the essentials of living a meaningful life, it seems to be the case that the

universe refuses to give up its secrets. A ridiculous book called *The Secret* made some fantastical claims about the power of mental effort, and its only value lies in getting people to understand that there are more realities than one, and that that reality is something fashioned by the mind. But the fact that this form of mental discipline will make one rich and powerful through the sheer device of belief is what makes the book risible. We cannot just assume a de facto position that the universe will yield her secrets just because the mind can think and wonder. The absence of a real commitment to the Good, or a construction of society that will train people to reject approaches that lead to evil actions, makes evil the default position since commitments to religion always seem to have a militancy about them. Remember the Christian hymn, “Onward Christian Soldiers” as a marker for the kind of rhetoric that does more harm than good, since the real purpose behind the iteration of the hymn is to get people to feel like they exist in a state of readiness for battle and not just the inner battle of the personality at war, but the battlefield of religious war, meaning trying very hard to correct one’s neighbors perceptions that he has the right route to faith. Islam, as we all know now, has the principle of Jihad, which liberal Muslims try to interpret as an inner commitment, but the Koran is so filled with passages like killing the infidel (anyone who is not Muslim), has led to a fundamentalism with disastrous results. Now Islam has to always be viewed with suspicion since we cannot know how seriously the practitioner takes such passages. Madrassas' tend to have vitriolic clerics who impugn the west for every imagined and real infraction in an obvious effort to put students into a militant mood: convert or die.

Militant stances seem to lead to an understanding of a religion as an unbreakable code for the enemy who always seems to be at the gate. Secrets used to be a large part of

the Mormon temple ceremony until the church elders wisely realized that it was a leftover practice of the older frontiersmen who really did have enemies who really did want to kill them. Cults seem oddly out of the news nowadays, but when they were thriving, mind control seemed to be a particular feature of their *modus operandi*. It might be argued that all religions use mind control in order to forbid some things and allow others as a way to make their members conform to the program that they believe God himself has revealed to them. From this point of view, Mormonism has not really moved that far from the definition of a cult since their control over the individual mind is almost absolute. With so many prohibitions and so much outer and inner policing going on, the Mormon really has to watch his step or else he will be facing a church court or failing the standard of “good standing” and thus feel like his salvation is perpetually imperiled. Not just for Mormonism (which is, however, a good case in point), but all religions want so much structure that a sort of gestalt begins to happen where the place of worship can also be perceived as a cage. A message of love keeps trying to struggle out of the mire, but it seems to take a lot of importuning to get that message to really adumbrate. Perhaps if a second Pentecost could happen, then people would really have a good idea about the better angels of religious dialogue.

So the good soldiers of religion will always be waiting to attack their real or perceived enemy. But the standards by which we judge a religion as a good one or a bad one seem to have less to do with the stridency of their preaching and more to do with the kind of person who emerges from the ranks. If that person embodies the better part of the human spirit, then we will most likely label the religion at least capable of producing a good cast of characters. But here we should be on guard for the exceptional individual

who has succeeded despite the odds. And perhaps Peter will be more interested in individual accomplishment over the affiliation he has aligned himself with since the sheer number of creeds makes checking for belief or nonbelief in Jesus something that really cannot adequately account for a thorough assessment. We have to assume that Peter's criteria are designed to check for a life lived realistically within the bounds of a person's abilities or else the whole exercise of living a spiritual life would just be an exercise in frustration. Not even attempting to sound out a religious life may be the individual's only fret about the encounter at the pearly gates at which few will be enemies because once they have realized they have indeed survived death, their warring tendencies will soften with this ersatz experience of an afterlife guarded by someone whom we hope is very wise. Entering into the kingdom of God, on the other, hand may be a this-worldly experience where heaven and hell interact in a way that will provide people with the ability to blindly encounter something sublime, whether their concept of God is housed in a particular theology or not. Peter's problem is not how to judge, for that is God's duty, but how to implement the category of humaneness as the parade of heaven goes credulously enter the gates. The issue of which religions pass muster must be such a secondary concern that the hope of a universal salvation was Jesus' aim all along, and that he removed himself from the equation in ironically initiating the means of his own obsolescence.

Our Naughty Neighbors

So far we have been talking about the religious influences in our world, and how people seek to find meaning and quell their fears about damnation through a God centered universe. Even though there is thin evidence for a God even being possible, most people still feel that the particular attributes of our world, the fact that it is here at all, and that we are capable of distinguishing between good and bad choices, means that there must be some reason for all of this, one that makes for a commonsense assumption that something or someone else, not us, was responsible for what we now have as a world. But there is a growing number of people who reject this vision of the world as divinely inspired, and prefer a more mechanistic picture of it. These people are even adamant that there could not be a God in the universe because science is either actively engaged in explaining it naturalistically, or that future scientists will be able to untangle whatever mysteries are left once we have grasped this mechanistic order. Already, evolution, as we have discussed, is being called just as much a fact as calling water H₂O,

and successfully gives us an account of the beginning of things that only the ignorant will reject, probably out of a slavish religious devotion. This desire to free humankind from what the naturalists think of as rank superstition is not just a rejection of God, but a carefully crafted mentality to pursue answers about the world in a secular context. These are our naughty neighbors. We call them atheists.

Bill Maher successfully lampoons the religious in his documentary *Religulous*. There is an emerging dissatisfaction with the way religion produces explanations since answers rarely make sense. Trying to justify the doctrine of the trinity, for instance, requires so much logic bending that a person interested in a straightforward answer will be forever disappointed. Add to this the idea that religions have really given up on trying to make sense, and just answer your simple question about a perplexing feature of a scripture you have read, and you will be faced with an adjuration that you must just have faith, something that can be not only unfulfilling but annoying. For a system of thought that is supposed to have all the answers, getting any will be completely and utterly frustrating.

A movement fueled by a group who has been called the New Atheists equally makes fun of religious pretensions because they see them as the by-product of self-willed ignorance. They almost seem wired differently than the rest of us. What for many of us is a perfectly plausible way of getting at the truth of our existence for them is a sign of the risibility of most of humanity. One of these, Christopher Hitchens, wrote a book called *God is Not Great*, where he proposed the idea that religion poisons everything. He writes that just about every social conflict in history has something to do with religion. It's like a medieval Typhoid Mary that keeps spreading deeper and deeper into human

institutions. He wants his reader to trust him that religion is an inherently manmade affair, and should not be trusted just because someone has told you that they have seen God or something equally impossible. The New Atheists, in trying to expose the absurdity of the religious program, tightly weave their fists around evolution as the one thing that will vindicate every outrageous piece of the religious myth they attempt to expose. Richard Dawkins, in his book *The God Delusion*, even goes as far as to say that we can explain the peculiar discovery of quantum physics that says physical laws are more or less an illusion. The reason we cannot pass our hand through a stone, for example, is explained by Dawkins as evolution training humankind to live in what he calls Middle world, where the laws of physics do what we expect them to do through adaptations to this world as we know it. Michael Shermer, while calling the theory of evolution the most significant discovery in history, even describes his trip to the Galapagos Islands as an almost religious pilgrimage. If this seems like over reaching, then you would probably be right, because it may seem that the atheists are involved in a simple substitution drill, descry one ideology and elevate another because it simply makes more sense to them, not because of any innate value that makes the scientific point of view inherently superior.

Some atheists in the past have taken a global view on humanity, saying that we are a cancer that the world would like to be rid of. It may not have escaped the attention of at least a few people that the increase in natural disasters has been making the world less people-friendly. While the boosters of global warming are not wrong that humans contribute to this, it may just be the case that we are entering a natural cycle that repeats itself every one or two hundred years or so. Many people are unaware of the “little ice

age” the world went through for several hundred years in the past, and now we are experiencing another weather phenomenon that seems indifferent to the importance of our survival. Stephen Hawking once said that if we don’t get off the planet and go colonize others, we would not in fact survive. So, the emerging consensus of those who don’t see humans and the earth as indivisibly tied, are currently winning the argument that there is nothing marking humanity as divinely ordained to rule the earth. We are rather stuck here right now, exposed to the buffetings of indifferent forces, and hoping that supernatural savior will arrive before the inevitable extinction begins.

This brings up a point that joins the debate on evolution. At the time Charles Darwin was studying evolution; it wasn’t something new. A biologist named Georges Cuvier had successfully argued that the world would thrive for a time, get destroyed by a flood, and then God would simply recreate it wholesale until the time of the next destruction where God would have to intervene again. Part of this speculation is based on the fossil record that will show marine creatures in the lower layers with life forms of increasing complexity appearing in the upper strata. The reason that Cuvier and others speculated about the mass extinction theory was because there are gaps in the fossil record, or in other words, no presence of transitional creatures. Nowadays, evolution deniers use this fact of the fossil record by saying that if there was evolution, it was happening somewhere else. They do not refer to Cuvier’s theory anymore of course, but they just think that the propagation of species was determined in one creative act. The fossil record is of course a bugaboo for evolutionists, but they have been able to find transitional creatures. Just a few years ago, some scientists discovered a fish with both gills and lungs. As far as humans go, proto-human types were being discovered, and also

just recently, they found a baby that had been preserved for around three million years, an animal that apparently shares our same line of descent. Just why these transitional creatures do not appear in the fossil record is something of a mystery, and gives the religious a stronger argument than they need to argue for the absence of evolution. While many of them will admit the truth of natural selection, they will not agree that evolution is an established fact. They try to advance pseudo-scientific ideas about their alternative, Intelligent Design. But this alternative always seems to fail to deliver on its promise as a scientifically reasonable alternative to evolution perhaps because it is overly reliant on a religious worldview, and also because it doesn't contain the kind of rigor that meets the criteria of a scientific theory.

Even if we can successfully argue that religions are medieval remainders of superstitious thinking, something exposed in some past Christian writings, the sheer proliferation of churches now shows that we cannot just write off religion as a thing of past importance that now only rings hollowly. Part of the problem has to do with the success of salesmanship, an almost capitalist critique of the endurance of religious ideology. People, after all, live in fear about the prospect of their lives ending and where in particular they will go if they go anywhere at all. The universality of these mortal fears makes the peddlers of religious information influential in their capitalizing on human dread, whether it be about life after death or what the point of living is. People live with all kinds of anxieties, from the mundane concerns of earning a living, to the supramundane concerns of confronting death. Jorge Luis Borges said something interesting in an interview. He said that he didn't care to have immortality; it was just not a concern of his. This is a very minority position, since the horror of just rotting in a

grave with no chance of soul survival acts as a kind of torture for most people. They may, perhaps, be unable to distinguish between an immortal hell and an infinity of unconsciousness. The atheists have no expectation of an eternal life and this doesn't seem to bother them. They are resigned to their position that, since there is no God, there is no need to worry about things like immortality. They just assume that their bodies break down to the atomic level, and that is just the natural state of things. Of course, the upshot is that nobody really knows what happens to you after you die, so speculation is all but useless. But God's salesmen successfully pitch their message because of the need to know, even when it is useless. Trying to focus on what is possible to decide about the nature of spiritual experience is decidedly difficult when emotions override the rational faculties so easily with the idea that something unknown constitutes a threatening stance.

Atheism is still the outsider, as we can easily imagine that a politician who doesn't claim to have a religious affiliation would not get elected. Moral fiber is the expected outcome of a religious education, but the Bible acts as a poor guide to discovering authentic moral principles. The Old Testament reads like the ravings of a half-mad God, who will even indulge in genocide to get his point across. The ten commandments are just simple injunctions that are rather self-evident, and any attempt to probe more deeply into why we are expected to follow them only aborts because there just is no material, nothing beyond the surface, that would require a deeper understanding. Some think that Jesus' ethics in the New Testament provide an improvement over the lapses in the old, but their applicability get seriously called into question, especially since no one in the modern church seems predisposed to his model, which was weighted toward an almost feminine sensibility about taking care of people.

So much of the everyday Christian's practice of their religion looks nothing like what Jesus proposed. And again, this can be chalked up to a failure on the New Testament authors' part in not providing us with a Jesus who was consistently advocating a more applied ethics, or an ethics absent a high degree of idealism. His message just doesn't match well with the way the world actually works, so there is a vacuum that has to be filled in with ideas independent of what might be called "pure Christian principles" whatever they are to a more earthy, real world understanding of their religion. This failure of the book supposed to be at the center of Christian understanding to provide helpful ways of living eventually turns it into a crystal ball where people expect disconnected pieces of scripture to "speak" to them as if the book itself were divining their thoughts and desires.

We could say, then, that there is a lot of magical thinking going on in religious circles. What I mean by "magical" is of course pejorative, but this is for the fact that the heavy emphasis on the supernatural makes the natural world a rather ghostly, almost non-existent place where there is supposed to be a higher reality, a reality that dominates most religionists' thinking. It's almost as if this world gets devalued as a place of imprisonment and the supernatural order of things get privileged in a way that causes a disconnection from what projects we should pursue in the here and now and what we should focus on as a future prospect. Regularly, some group or some preachers suddenly decide they know the nearness of the end of the world. People have even sold everything they own upon hearing this news so strong is their trust in these prognosticators, only to be disappointed and come home to an empty house if they even have a house to come home to. The net result is an inversion of priorities, where concerns for the soul override

the issues that the facts of our embodiment raise since it is as beings who have material bodies subject to the predispositions and innately implanted tendencies that are our real concerns and yet embodiment as the true starting point for deciding how to live goes unnoticed with this supernatural focus, promoted by God's salesmen, as the central concern when nothing could be farther from the truth. The situation is like expecting a balloon to ground us, instead of us grounding the balloon. But perhaps I am speaking for those Christians who are the most devout, and that there may have to come an explanation for the majority who don't share the same largesse of faith.

People who call themselves Christians far outnumber the people who actually practice the religion, so what are we to make of these name-only Christians? When we say that there are billions of Christians, of that number, how many actually believe everything they're told about the precepts of Christianity? The same is true for evolution. People are hopelessly misinformed on the basic principles, so when they are called upon to defend them, they flounder with just the most basic of answers. If the person is trying to refute evolution to them, they will not be able to mount a very strong defense because their interest in the subject just doesn't reach a level of adequate understanding. So we have two camps. Both are completely incompetent at explaining their respective beliefs either because they don't have the interest or feel the stakes of ignorance keenly enough. Most people could care less about the minutia, the vague little ins and outs of what makes for a competent understanding of their belief system, perhaps because they realize they just don't have to. After all, we live in a society of experts, where people have devoted their lives to examining the issue in their specialization closely, so why not just defer to them? Obviously the answer is out there, but why do I have to know it?

This attitude is what has prompted Daniel Dennett in his book, *Breaking the Spell*, to suggest that people just do what he calls believing in belief. In other words, they agree that to believe in something is good after all, but don't feel required to believe in it themselves. On the surface, they will assent to everything you describe about the beliefs they are supposed to have, but once you have left the room, they will lapse back into a state of unconcern. We might be able to say that there are a lot of incipient atheists out there. They recognize the value of having a religion but can no more muster the strength to achieve its goals than they can to eat something they hate. Whether or not these masses of people, for there are a lot of them (as Dennett intuited), can ever be persuaded to give up on their lackadaisical attitude for a commitment one way or another is probably a fool's errand. The problem is the natural tendency of human nature. Without a strong motivation brought on by some supernal experience, people will just act in their best interests. People are naturally selfish. They don't want to leave their comfort zone unless there is some compelling reason to do so.

This idea that people either don't know or don't care about the principles they supposedly embrace, will make the atheist bolder. Atheists, as I've said, are more ardently striving for a public thoroughly informed of what is wrong with religion, but people don't hear their message clearly because the atheists have already branded themselves with a stigma. Why believing in God has become such a closely held requirement in society is hard to say, especially given the outward appearance of diversity. But people still harbor, within a small corner in their minds, a view of intolerance for the stridency of some of the atheists' contributions. Sometimes this is the atheists' own fault since they do wield their arguments like a bludgeon sometimes.

Maybe they have just given up on having civil discourse on the subject because people already have inborn prejudices against them. These same people with prejudices and all probably no more practice their religion in the “right” way than an unbeliever can successfully defend evolution. But God’s salesmen have coded the debate to mean there are a wrong side and a right side to be on. And this is a false dilemma. The idea of relativity has been so strongly rejected that proposing it anymore seems pointless. People are wedded to an absolutist reading of reality; there must be a God and a devil, right and wrong, one path to happiness, and other positions that people are required to inhabit as if they were carved in stone. It is the nature of our culture to assume there is always a right answer. But when faced with giving an explanation about why this should be so, they are seriously hamstrung by the limitations of their own education in the subject.

Perhaps part of the reason for this state of affairs is driven by the competitiveness that seeps into every nook and cranny of our recognition of our American identity. Who wins and who loses is tracked with the most singular probity. Take the Vietnam War as an example. Here we fell into a stalemate for so long with the opposing power that winning and losing failed to have the same kind of suasion wars otherwise command. The Vietnam War was being judged differently than other military conflicts because gaining ground, a usual way for determining nearness to victory, was increasingly seen as impossible, so body counts and captured vehicles and weaponry became the way generals could tell which way the war was trending. Certainly, the number of American casualties was getting much too high for a war of this scale. Compare the war in Iraq where casualties only numbered around 3,000 while the Vietnam War produced 50,000 casualties in a similarly bounded geographical area. No one will forget President Bush

flying in an F-16 to land on an aircraft carrier with a banner of Mission Accomplished proudly displayed behind him. Now that we are seven years into the conflict, and it was really through buying off the Sunnis that the war began to turn in America's favor, not military prowess, we have the situation of modern warfare falling subject to underestimation.

If even a war cannot be readily interpreted as a clear sign of ultimate victory, then what hope have we for debates about culture and society, science and religion? Must someone win? Sometimes, movements start that were precipitated by some perceived cataclysm. The so-called Tea Party movement was a response to Barack Obama's liberal policies, and the word socialism began to appear in dialogue again, but this time it gained an uglier definition than before because it was happening here, in America, the only developed nation without some form of it. The Tea Party movement was so successful, however, that members of it actually captured 60 seats in Congress. These uninformed troopers fighting an ideology they barely understand now have some power in the direction America should take. But they probably couldn't even pass a basic civics exam. This movement was reactionary; it wasn't based on some well thought out plan of execution. They just used anger as a weapon and capitalized on the discontent of the ill informed.

This propensity to remain in ignorance, even when one is striving for greater understanding, makes the search for the best available position dangerous. As we know, Hitchens was right about one thing. A lot of awful things have been done in the name of God throughout history. There probably isn't one historical epoch without an example of it. Burning people at the stake is one example of religious people preying on other

religious people for heresies real or only perceived, but the fact that this was considered an option for dealing with dissent is troubling right down to the bones. Cruelty becomes the default position for those who feel the need to punish what they consider evil. And they presume to know the mind of God on these issues. Dostoevsky's portrayal of the religious leader in his chapter called "The Grand Inquisitor" in his novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, faced a person who was apparently Jesus returned, and not only did the inquisitor know this, but he had Jesus arrested in order to lay out a speech. He presumed to tell Jesus that there was now no more need for him. The church, the inquisitor said, provided for everyone's needs so the presence of a real messiah would not only be distracting, but ultimately unfruitful. They had already taught the people to hate miracles, as the manifestation of unearthly power of which there really was none. Jesus' fall into obsolescence was just the natural fate of a people who had got along without him for so long that his actual reappearance would only result in indifference to him.

Dostoevsky's Inquisitor was not just about a bureaucrat protecting his power, but about the inability of present beings being able to feel contemporary with Jesus. Even if Jesus came back tomorrow, would we recognize him if he didn't come back sporting the chariot of fire? And if Jesus did come back because of some faulty wiring in the mechanisms of reincarnation, would his contemporaneousness with us allow us to recognize him as he truly is, or is there something time bound about the way the Christian story has unfolded? If he had come later in history, perhaps Christians would be wearing little electric chairs around their necks instead of crosses. Even the crosses are kind of unnerving because crucifixion was a particularly Roman form of cruelty, and the Christians seem appallingly ignorant of this ethnic association attending the symbol, and,

to make a comparison, the swastika with all its horrible associations actually appears in more ancient symbol systems, but has been forever altered as a representation of hate.

Kierkegaard wrote on the inability to be a contemporary of Jesus, but in his typical paradoxical way, insisted that we had to act as if we were contemporaries with him or else encrustations of false belief would be the result. God and time have a tenuous relationship, since it is linear for us, but not for him. So what do we do when one of the greatest events in history, the birth of an actual God, gets foreclosed within its own historical moment? Do we trust our knowledge of how we have framed Jesus' personality in the current century, or is there something about penetrating the layers of myth that would give us a more successful picture of him? For those who don't care, the question is just an abstraction. Can anyone know anyone with absolute certainty, and even if they could, wouldn't this constitute a giant offense against the person's mental privacy?

We can see that the issue of history is a compelling component of judging the past from the present's point of view. People continue to write about important historical moments because there always seem to be multiple ways to interpret an event. This may be even a little unsettling since we cannot call the project of interpreting history a simple reiteration of facts, but must strew the facts in a certain hermeneutical pattern in order to manufacture a new perspective on something that is unverifiable on its face. Religions go through these same recurrences. Some scholars have been quoted as saying that there have been millions of religions that flash into existence and then extinguish just as quickly. Probably the only reason that neither Christianity nor Islam was subject to the same fate is probably because both of them were, at one time, given state religion status. Certainly the Vatican had a controlling interest as a superpower during its heyday, and to

this day, it still has sovereign borders with the full respect of being a separate country. The survival of these religions is explainable in terms of their role in history as the only authorized routes to salvation. The claim of authority came so automatically that people wouldn't think to question it since they relied on the "white magic" of the church to protect them from evil. This enmeshing of religious principles with superstition was perhaps unrecognized in the early church perhaps because the church fathers were probably infected with the same concerns. What is possible to be thought in an era is often bounded by a metaphysical realization that true access to the ultimately real is obfuscated by the intellectual limits of their imaginative faculties.

But we can begin to see a pattern emerging, and that is the ineffectiveness of the religious program of salvation to truly do what it proposes. Since knowledge was actually something to be feared, self-willed ignorance became the operational position. It is what put the "Dark" in the middle ages. While some historians like to detect some flowering of aesthetic originality in the period, the shortcomings of its closed door to scientific speculation made it a rigid and suppressive epoch. There is even a kind of return to medievalism in our current century as everyone would like to believe in a notion of conformity that is so suppressive of diversity that it would strangle the life out of the democratic experiment. Atheism gathers its steam from the suppression of independent thinking. People now are less likely to allow others to tell them what to do and how to think than ever because the prevailing ethic is one of routing ones way to a self-directed definition of success. A religion like Mormonism is able to maintain a suppressive campaign against recognizing what eventually will turn out to be a better model of morality happens primarily because Mormons embrace capitalism in ignorance of all its

moral faults. A quick examination of their priorities will show unsettling trends. The net worth of the church, while secretive, has been estimated to be in the trillions, and, based on the kind of leaders who regularly receive high positions, material success often becomes one of the criteria for evaluating their faith as if there were a direct connection between being a successful businessman and having a successful spiritual practice. The will to make money seems to overpower any substantive moral thinking because the way the game is rigged, the way success is so blithely defined, makes the individual more interested in materialistic goals than religiously supplied norms. The power of religion then is either consciously or unconsciously blemished by the frenzy of Wall Street activity.

The individual and the church thus suffer from a double powerlessness. The individual is subsumed by his employer where his expected conformity, if failed, will cause a loss of either station or the job itself. So half the pressure of the workplace is preserving ones place or avoid being shown the door. The church is helpless to turn this tremendous concern for occupational conformity toward a more moral program because this overmastering desire for money and security is just the way society is now. The church is still stuck in its medieval ways, with its peculiar masses and sacraments that they refuse to update because of their entrapment in their own understanding of what constitutes proper worship. Even the very devout will suffer some form of disillusionment because of the severed connection between modern society and religious immovability. Atheists will be happy to point out that the main concern of humans now has nothing to do with religion because the churches aren't willing to go the distance in updating their approach to winning souls. Even though the religious right screams about

the violation of their religious values, they do so hollowly because it is mere affectation and they don't realize that in order to instruct someone else in what to do they must practice what they preach. If they truly wanted a wider spread of morals in society, then they would have to sacrifice some of their more materialistic aims and avoid falling into statistical hell, where the proof in the pudding is how well they live their lives. But the level of cruelty among avowed Christians toward those who do not share their values is so rampant that it is hard to take them seriously when they bitch and moan about moral decrepitude. They don't seem to have an understanding of even the most basic standards of humane behavior.

The debate really comes down to what it means to be a human being in a world that increasingly seems indifferent to our fate. Coming up with more compelling reasons for our existence on this planet than just the default position, "Because God put us here," is really necessary because the kind of God Christians worship already has proven his laxity about our concerns. Many of the rabbis in countries Germany had controlled in WWII were adjured to evacuate the country, but many of them just said, "I am waiting for God." Once the exterminations happened, and there was no messiah forthcoming, making sense of God's non-interference required a lot of reflection on the function of suffering. The more obvious status of reality as a thing where indifference to our plight is the norm should give rise to thinking on the kind of society that is congenial to imagination. This means that we should consider ourselves capable of going beyond reform, but actually begin to puzzle out a radical restructuring of what society as a whole should value. This will tend to put us into utopian thinking, but we need not fall prey to

an overly rosy picture of what's possible to accomplish. We should just stay true to a mandate suggesting possible ventures.

Abraham Maslow could be accused of utopian thinking when he said we should design society so that people would be taught to embrace the Good. His was a secular argument idealistically proposing that the current state of things diminished people no matter how valid they supposed their route to success was. His main concern was that the progress of technology would outstrip moral progress and we have lived to prove him correct. In fact, if anyone could point out just how we have improved moral behavior, it would shock me to no end. And yet we have more effective ways to entertain ourselves, to kill each other in wars, to digitally span the globe with every mentionable computer virus in tow. Human trafficking is one of the biggest problems in the world, with millions of people being sold for sex on a daily basis. The whole universe of perpetually revolving cruelties reveals a move to the protean in moral areas. Perhaps we should revise our idea of morality to include these facts as just morally neutral things because of their sheer proliferation, but if we consider immorality something which causes pain to another, then we have to include these new realities as morally impermissible. Tolerating practices that seem to create a new norm would seem to require a reappraisal of moral standards. We don't want to be prudish and punitive just because the morality handed down to us can't change. It can. But where we draw the lines holds us responsible for any damage or human fallout. It is a fact that morality has degenerated, not progressed, and materialistic America is the prime violator of acceptable behavior. Maslow's wish for a morally good society will never get realized because people's resistance to change is fatally attached to their confidence in their self-assured sense of themselves as morally competent people

even when it is totally irrational to suppose so. In fact, reaching a consensus on how to educate people to value Maslow's idea of the Good is impossible because of the unwillingness of people to let go of their already cherished beliefs in their own goodness. The Bible tells us that no one is without sin, something with the appearance of truth since we carry burdens around with us either rectifiable or not. The moment we begin thinking that moral change cannot happen is the moment when we realize that we probably never had a firm grasp of morality in the first place.

Of course, the religious among us would like to blame all this on secularity, but modernism does not presuppose degeneracy. The apocalyptic mindset of the Christians keeps them pushing an ideal society forward into some distant date when the world ends and Jesus has set up a divine kingdom of his own. This failure of imagination, that we need to wait for divine intervention to do anything, flies in the face of everything we know about how God acts in the world, which is to do virtually nothing. Why people cling to a failed program of thinking is hard to understand. It probably has to do with not recognizing the program as failed as such. Imperfection as the genuine state of humanity is easy to state as a proposition, but infallibility is going to mount in their minds because the correction of error requires humility, a kind of humility that does not debase the personality, but possesses an openness to admit when one has done wrong. People don't like to admit to their weaknesses so personal growth becomes something of a chimera. We start off the journey of our lives with a self-centered attitude that we should be accommodated. Add to this the tendency to see the world in black and white terms, and we have a lot of little monsters walking around just waiting for self-satisfaction and not

trying to struggle out of their state of perpetual childishness because maturity lies in between the gaps of understanding, making it forever unrecognizable.

So perhaps the fact that the religious are easily swayed by the fairy tales their religions feed them can be accounted for in the prospect that they have never truly grown past their childhood complexes. Certainly a feeling of superiority preoccupies the atheists who have even formed a group they call the Brights, seemingly separating themselves from all the dim bulbs that walk around as unenlightened knuckle draggers. So here we have come across a fault in the atheists too. Their own self-assurance is a hindrance to correctional behavior as well. Once we start balkanizing belief, setting up warring camps with identity badges and all, where does the atheist go from here if they have imbibed the principle of infallibility as well? With everyone wanting to be right, there seems no possibility of instructing him in the productiveness of realizing error. Sure, if you ask them, they will readily tell you that they have made thousands of mistakes for which they are truly sorry, but when you examine them for how the recognition of these mistakes has changed them, you will look in vain. The simple fact that they rarely learn from their mistakes marks them for an arrogant attitude that suggests the mistakes they may have made were not really classifiable as mistakes, but simple lapses in judgment a little equilibrium has already solved. Change, especially change in humans, has very little regard since almost nobody accomplishes it. We remain babies for the whole of our lives inwardly screaming for the teat that has been unjustifiably taken from us.

But just how to regard the human being in the face of this ineradicable immaturity will be informed by which side of the fence one stands on: religion or science. Since the religious will already be predisposed to see human nature as an inherently evil thing, they

constantly battle demons they believe are luring them into sin. Just why the devil has so much more power over the human mind than God is sometimes explained by our inveterate natures needing spiritual cleansing to contact the holiness withheld from us except the greater power of the devil is expunged. But this just means that we have accepted the devil has won the day. Since Jesus' proffer of salvation is severely limited in that only a very few will be capable of fulfilling the requisite standards, people will have to live with the anxiety of never quite being sure, forever on the edge of knowing but finding the answer perpetually withheld. Ignorance of one's ultimate destination is just the operative position of the religionist.

But if we can see the influence of the devil more clearly than we can God's, whom after all was this world meant for? Perhaps when God cast out Satan and his minions from heaven, they became the true target of soul saving. Perhaps Jesus, in complete myopia, only wants to save the demon infected. The Christians may be making a horrible mistake since, if it is true that it is only the very wicked that Jesus is saving, they are wasting their time since, in a curious inversion, it will be the sinners and the atheists who get to go to heaven and it is the good rule followers who burn in the devil's furnaces. The imagery I'm using is eerily reminiscent of the Nazi death camps with Nazi's actually doing the Jews a favor. In this upside down logic, targeting the Jews and marking them evil may makes Adonai want to include them in his new circle of friends, who are, after all, are the true targets of salvation. The religious are so fearful, as they should be, of being on the wrong side once the final judgment comes, they become completely paralyzed by their unexamined fears. If one does not fear death, what is there to fear in life? The bold stroke of the atheist is to remove this ostentatious problem. Their

only anxiety is worrying about how to wrangle their own belief system without falling under some form of persecution. Perhaps other minority groups actually share unrecognized sympathies with the atheists' societal worries. African Americans still suffer from their rejection by white society so that actions viewed as specifically "white" are derided in favor of their own assumptions of their cultural authenticity. Sometimes this has disastrous results when minority children in the educational system view appearing "smart" as a synonym for acting "white." Teachers in inner city school systems are mainly babysitters because the utter rejection of educational success works as a signifier of a certain kind of betrayal. This situation of absentee morality, where the things that should be valued gets rejected through an age old animus, has echoes of intolerance that has haunted humanity probably since homo sapiens began hunting down the Neanderthals.

The notion of tolerance so fatally neglected spreads to all levels of society where resentments form out of recognitions of our bifurcated social discourse on creating equality, of which we now just have an appearance of it. Lying beneath the attempt to have congenial relations that cut across all racial and social strata is the frothing animal hate that, since it wants to wear a different face than its actual threat level, thrusts into reality an awkwardness where people acquire prejudices where they suffer a complete loss of understanding of where they came from. Since society functions like a sifter where people's station is determined by a cluster of factors, communication is forever burdened by unrecognized habits of thought seeking to cleave rather than to join together. If religions were completely successful at uniting populations by similarities in their beliefs, perhaps we wouldn't have to live with such haunted interactions. The real

mission of the church should be to mitigate differences with a program of compassion, but their inability to do so just exposes the bankruptcy of theistic thought wanting so desperately to justify its relevance and in the very act of doing so, lays bare the seeds of its own destruction sitting there just waiting for the activating bell. Part of this can be attributed to this inability to successfully eliminate mortal fears and partly out of allowing our society to maintain a morally abrasive stratification. The atheists have become the new preservers of a proper regard of progress. While having to put up with the religious calling them amoral, they use science as a silencing agent with its more universalizing qualities.

Actually, the separations between the atheists and the religious may not be the chasm it appears to be. After all, there are Christians who believe in evolution and scientists who believe in God. One Bible believing scientist was responsible for mapping the human genome, and wrote a book called *The Language of God* in which he proposed to use his discovery as a step on the way to uniting the two competing communities by showing how genetics could be studied as a way of discovering God. If we look at a famous transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, we see evidence of a great intellect grappling with the ultimate questions and coming to a conclusion that we may not have to always appeal to an orthodox understanding of there being a god, but instead, to reason about the possibility of the presence of something he calls the Oversoul. This idea of regarding God not as a father figure but as a universal impulse accounting for some people's need for a kind of spirituality falling beyond the bounds of traditional understandings makes for a dialogue that wants to explore the nature of consciousness having a "guide" more natural than supernatural because the Oversoul is a kind of

playmate, an implantation of the human connection with the rest of the universe as just a consequence of sentience itself.

It can be possible, then, to have an almost secularized God, where the natural world gets deeply involved in the production of divine characteristics. This union of the religious perspective with the secularists is a clever way to lay bare the actual dynamic between the religious and the atheists. Even though each worldview would like to claim a rigid line of separation between them, we have to wonder if this claim really stands up to scrutiny. Eventually, everyone will have to face the logical consequences, which work independently of desire, of their stated cluster of assumptions. Richard Dawkins, for instance, in order to account for life on the planet, actually revealed that he favors a theory that the planet was “seeded” by another alien civilization. This embrace of an almost science-fictional theory is astonishing, but flows logically from his precepts since one of the underlying concerns of evolutionists is trying to explain how things got started in the first place. While fooling around with such ideas as asexual reproduction, and the “accidental” appearance of enzymes that happened to coalesce into a matrix capable of starting the evolution machine in motion, there really is no good explanation that doesn’t, in the end, stretch the mind into the kind of speculation we find with Dawkins. Actually, in order for those enzymes to reach the level of an actual life, they must pass through a series of stages and eventually achieve what is known as the ninth configuration. The odds of this happening are something like one in a trillion trillion. It is not only easier to believe in a God given this fantastical threshold, but also makes all of our trust in science amazingly fragile. So even the atheists will have perhaps private beliefs that, when revealed, look quite bizarre. Wanting your system of thought to encompass absolutely

everything possible (and perhaps impossible) only clears the way to a confrontation with absurdity. Nothing that exists as a method of explanation can possibly be so comprehensive that it can account for every iota of what we might call borderland issues. In the DMZ of the borderland, we ultimately mesh all ideologies together because the borderland is a place of questions. The most oft used questions are “why” and “how” but the pressure to satisfy everyone gets ridiculed. In the borderland, all concepts along with the people who hold them are ultimately equal, meaning that we cannot draw distinctions in any way. Here, ambiguity and flexibility are the ruling principles. Skepticism is a highly valued trait since we can only know things in parts, meaning we don’t have access to a totality of truth. Neither would this be even wanted. The truth quickly emerges. We are all hopeless ignoramuses, so critically eyeing the competition is actually an exercise in self-cancellation. If we want to reach a level of Samadhi about our lives, the borderland is the place for us. What should we do when we swell our breasts with an inflated idea of our own importance and assumed certainty of our cherished opinions? Simple. Run for the border.

Judgment Day, Part Deux

So far I have been blathering on about the religious perspective in a way that suggests I think the best way to approach it is to ridicule it. Ridicule has a long and rich history, from Voltaire to Trollope. It presupposes that your target is worthy of being taken down a peg, and I think I have shown there is a lot on both sides of the ideological divide to make fun of. But now let's draw a hood over our heads and immerse ourselves in the religious perspective as if they were truly right about what they profess. Just imagine that there really is a heaven and hell, and that most of us have to just put up with the idea that our destination will not be the sunny skies of paradise. I once had a conversation with myself in which Jesus himself came down to visit me and told me that Mormonism is indeed the one true religion. I found myself saying to him, "I'd rather go to hell." The possibility that hell could be a more desirable place even if everything about the religious perspective is true, even if God himself came down to tell us so, putting us

in the awful position that the horrific terrors of faith (and they are terrors) should absolutely be regarded as the God's own truth, would we be able to stomach it? Would the now verified hell actually be a preferable place since the kind of actions we would have to perform in the name of truth actually produces more anxiety? And an infinity of suffering begins to seem desirable. We know our lives occur in the blink of an eye upon this time bound earth, but still find ourselves reveling in eternal notions as if we had all the time in the world. What is it about "this" world that attracts us so much even in the acknowledgement that eternity awaits us and yet we are unable to feel the pressure of the afterlife? There seems to be an amazing lack of worry despite the fact that, in all truth, the thought of where we end up after death should consume us.

A college professor giving a lecture gave an anecdote about a preacher who sat next to the sickbed of some person, and for some reason, perhaps worrying about his friend's fate in the afterlife, prayed to know about the truth of the existence of hell. Upon completion of his prayer, he felt a hand on his shoulder and when he turned around, Jesus himself was standing there. According to this preacher, Jesus proceeded to tell him that hell was a real place, and not really surprisingly, the preacher then proclaimed hallelujah, delighting in the knowledge that there would be human roasts for the devil to stick his fork into. The college professor called this kind of phenomenon "cultural inertia" where people have spiritual experiences that seem particularly tied to their own belief system, so it is impossible to have an objective look at these kinds of experiences as absolute verifications of truth. Some Catholics are absolutely certain they have seen the Virgin Mary with an especially weird case where a group of children in a town called Medjergorge, located somewhere in Eastern Europe, honestly believed that the Virgin

Mary appeared to them on a weekly basis to give them instructions. There are also many reports of people seeming to recall past lives as if verifying the truth of reincarnation but the majority of these reports (and there was actually some scientific research on this) actually came from India where the assumption of having past lives if not believed was thought to be a manifestation of insanity.

Let's assume, for arguments sake, that our own cultural assumptions about God and the afterlife so forth and so on is actually true, and perform a rhetorical trick where we put ourselves in the shoes of a true believer and ponder on the awful consequences of our worst fear, that everything I've been ridiculing is actually so holy that I am committing absolute blasphemy because the nature of the universe is actually correctly apprehended by the religious perspective. If we know the truth but want to go to hell anyway, then what, for God's sake, is the matter? We have to get at what makes this awful prospect of religion describing an accurate reality so repulsive. We have to figure out why hell is not only bigger than heaven by design but also by desire.

Now we plop ourselves right in the center of Christianity, our chosen religion for now with all of its anxieties, joys, fears, and mental instabilities. I include joys in the list because there must be something about the religion that keeps people in it. In order to explore the satisfaction of being religious, we have to understand the kind of person who not only buys into religious promises but also actually believes they come to pass no matter how made up this assumed confirmation is. But before we engage in this exercise, I want to explore, in a summary of various religious beliefs, just how the idea of attraction of some of the religions described below works while also revealing how intensely spurious they are on their face and yet they march converts in slaverling over the

assumed satisfactions of their newly designated place of impotent power (oxymoron intended).

Some of the obviously fake power of some preachers actually has the appearance of effectiveness. For instance, Benny Zin (actually Indian nationality, so I don't know why the name change), once wished to make people feel the power of the spirit among a large number of people who had come to hear him preach. He pointed to a particular area of the audience and then waved his hand, and astonishingly, they all swooned. After doing this in several places in the audience, the display looked awfully impressive, and I was helpless to give a sane explanation for it. It is perhaps instances like this that convince people there is indeed a supernatural power that the particularly blessed have access to. So many of the popular preachers indulge in healing sessions. The appearance of effectiveness can appear so strong that not only the crowds, but also the people who receive the healing remained convinced of the actuality of success. But even though there is a perception of real spiritual power, we still have to wonder if the people are in some way being duped.

Even the preachers themselves may participate in the illusion. Part of the problem lies in these people actually believing in their own lies. There was an interesting piece on the news about a boy, about four-years-old, who had an unusual gift for preaching, quite a prodigy actually. His father, seeming to ignore the innate talent issue, and in very poor and uneducated English, proclaimed the gift of the Holy Spirit as resting on his shoulders to such an extent that he refused to notice the element of exploitation going on.

Clusters of religious geniuses, if we dare call them that, seem to pop up from time to time. We might even call the leader of the disastrous Heaven's Gate cult one such

person since, after the suicides, it was found that many of the men had actually castrated themselves and the insanity of believing that there was a spaceship waiting for them on the outer boundary of the world that could only be entered into by dying and actually completing this requirement of their religion makes you wonder just how credulous a person could possibly be. But this extreme example is really not as out of the ordinary as one would think. For instance, Scientology has such bizarre beliefs resembling science fiction, which may not be all that surprising considering the “religion” was founded by a science fiction writer. They require people to sign a billion year contract, something that is not the strangest thing about it. They think that aliens visited the earth and implanted or rather infected early humans with some sort of parasite that has been passed on for generations and now the point of their practices is to try and expunge that alien presence. They have a process when one is interested in entering the religion, where they ask you to grasp onto two metal rods and proceed to “measure” the so-called thetan level in you. What exactly a thetan level is I’m not sure, but they also have other beliefs about the presence of other worlds, like a galactic empire that has existed for some millions of years or so, complete with key figures they actually have names for and with no idea or, by the way, no evidence of how exactly to verify all of this becomes such a giant leap of faith that we might have to explore a concept capable of explaining the appeal of these pseudo religions’ ascendancy, especially since this most bizarre worldview of Scientology culls many of its members from the ranks of the Hollywood elite.

Once, Tom Cruise got into a little trouble, while giving an interview to Matt Laurer of the Today Show, when he first praised his religion (how I recoil at using this moniker for Scientology) for inventing ways to overcome developmental disabilities. He

claims they cured him of dyslexia, and then he went on a tirade about the corruption of psychiatry, claiming to have some sort of special knowledge about it through studying its history and then assuming himself an expert on the topic. He was so strident in his delivery of his views that many people believed he had made a giant public relations mistake. Perhaps he did make himself seem like a run of the mill fanatic, but then, to buy into Scientology requires an ability to just shut off the rational faculty of the mind, something that is not unusual among all religions, but seems to require an especially high level of self squashing in order to embrace something that departs so phenomenally from any kind of recognizable conception of reality. Having people who call themselves human who actually wish to convince people of these incredible claims twists the mind into a knot. We may not be able to comprehend what kind of person is capable of this, but certainly they exist, and whether or not we decide to include them in the human community may be a decision we may have to make.

Certainly the missionary activities of Christian religions dupes the bible wielders into believing they are actually doing good. But, if we take the case of Mormonism, perhaps the most aggressive of all missionary ventures, the decision to commit what they honestly believe is an emergency matter of giving people absolutely critical information to the hands of nineteen-year-old boys goes on as a hugely unrecognized risk. If the Mormons really believed that their notion of salvation was all that critical, then why they dump all their resources into immature minds to accomplish this task is completely baffling. As long as the numbers of the baptized hold an acceptable quota, the leaders seem unconcerned.

I also attended a mission to South Korea in 1982, and what I discovered in my studies almost made me leave my mission, but my mission president convinced me to stay. Amazingly, I baptized 38 people. The mission average was somewhere around five. In fact, some of the hardest working missionaries (needless to say I was rather lackadaisical but it obviously worked for me), those who pushed and pushed and traipsed around knocking on constant doors (I hardly ever did this) and wearing out their vocal chords delivering so many “discussions” without any results. It is a cruel irony that I was considered such a prodigious missionary when I was a regular rule breaker and hardly believed what I was preaching and these poor hard workers maybe baptized just one convert. But now I should leave Mormonism in order to recall us back to our original mission to play the role of true believer and in our pretend state, and also with a wry smile occupying our faces, we will immerse ourselves in the closed brains of the religious, in an almost Freddy Kruger like nightmare, where the ideology even torments in dreams. I should reveal that when I was a teenager, I regularly dreamed that Jesus had finally arrived in his chariot of fire, and as the world began to burn, I would face my mother and tell her how sorry I was that my unworthiness would prevent me from joining her in the clouds. Such is the perversity of a religious mind encouraged in this kind of thinking because church leaders regularly preach that working out salvation should be done with “fear and trembling” and so the message of love, which I have talked about before, gets seriously undermined.

And here we are, at the temple gates, ready and waiting for our marching orders. But the woefulness of Christianity’s past is only subtly felt in the modern churches today. In fact, history is a rather uncomfortable subject for all religions. Since the tales told

about ignominy and nobility intertwine in a disconnected way, the linear surface of the Christians' destined arc disrupts among all the papal abuses and major and minor corruptions with one period in history even having two popes each trumpeting their authentic claim, only to excommunicate each other, an act that has never been rectified. But then again, such disciplined examination of Catholic claims to an unbroken line of authority all the way from Peter himself, gets seriously questioned even without the event of rival popes breaking the chain. So part of our role as true believers is to ignore history to a certain degree. We have to understand that the very notion of questioning authority is considered inherently obscene. So should we come across some factoid an examination of the past has revealed, we have to be careful that we keep our clear headedness to ourselves. It may seem difficult to do something that may seem immoral at first, but then we have to understand that the very idea of morality has been circumvented by a new realization of it. Allegiance is considered much more important than anyone's puny assessment of morality; how could they arrogate to themselves the power to tell the leaders what morality actually is? After all, the leaders are closer to the source of the person who dispatches moral commands, namely God, so they are the only ones authorized to authenticate a truly moral action. This presumption that the leader has of actually knowing the mind of God may seem unsettling to us, but mediators help relieve the pressure of getting at all the answers on our own. If we have to give up a little bit of our independence in the name of reaching that elusive salvation, then wouldn't the sacrifice be worth it? Most religious people would think so.

We could try to scan the religious universe to ascertain the usual level of intelligence of the church, but actually, there seems to be a wide range. Not everyone

who believes in God possesses a primitive worldview. The Vatican even has its own astronomers. To refer back to Bill Maher's documentary, he had an interesting conversation with one of these astronomers. They were talking about the role of science in the Bible. The astronomer very astutely explained that it was impossible to find science in the Bible because the timeline we use to mark intellectual progress shows that the usual dating of events in the Bible from the earliest known writings forward means that the scope of history in which we find the first instances of scientific speculation doesn't occur until very late, so the idea that the Bible can illuminate anything on the practice of science is not only unfruitful but actually impossible. In a fantastically funny scene in the documentary, Maher visits a Christian established creationism museum, and the cameraman focuses in on a picture of a pint-sized dinosaur with something lying on his back. The viewer quickly concludes what the object is, and after this brief pause to let the viewer identify it, a subtitle appears that says, "Yes, that's a saddle."

Of course, these museum proprietors heavily believe in the young earth hypothesis, so they have to somehow square the irrefutable evidence of creatures that have gone extinct but appear in the fossil record, in a way that leads to the kind of absurdities I mentioned with the saddled dinosaur. If you ask the creationists about their view of the dinosaurs, they will happily tell you that they (T-rex and all) were actually very small, fitting into the ark (really?) where they co-existed with Noah's family once they finally reached dry land. Of course, as religious people, we don't have to accept this view of things, since it is just one view among many potential Christian worldviews. There are many kinds of theologies to align with and some are more practical or make more sense than others, but whether one wants to get at the kind of perspective offered by

more liberal exponents who are trying to understand the religious universe in a more nuanced way may cause a perplexity. Can all this often-unrecognized variety actually come under the umbrella of what we might call acceptable interpretations?

Once, a certain preacher in an inner city church (he happened to be black) started preaching that there was no hell. His message actually intended to expose the project of Christianity as interested in universal salvation, meaning that everyone would be saved. In typical fashion, his ideas met with very stiff opposition, his attendance level shrinking from week to week, until he was eventually stripped of his position by his denomination. His situation spread until reports of what was going on with him reached a national level. After he suffered a period of lack, meaning that he had to face the fact that he would never preach again, he began getting all kinds of mail, emails, and so forth, bursting with tremendous support for him. He had a very powerful spiritual experience where he felt the presence of God actually approving of him. Some of the criticism he received from other preachers was actually very spurious. One preacher interviewed by a television reporter actually said that he didn't know what he was preaching for if there was no hell and that all Jesus talked about was hell. Actually, the word hell only occurs 11 times in the New Testament, and as I have discussed, had a very different connotation than the modern church adopted.

So strong was the support this hell denying preacher received, coming from all quarters, Mormons, Catholics (some Catholic theologians were beginning to advance the idea that although hell existed it would be empty), homosexuals, other preachers who had similar beliefs they kept private for precisely the reason that what happened to him might happen to them. But to make a long story short, the preacher was able to amass so large a

base of support that he eventually acquired his own meeting hall and was free to preach again, heretical or no.

Despite the appearance of one monolithic opinion covering the whole of Christianity, a close look will expose a lot of diversity. To take the Quakers as an example, their gentleness should be highly praised. Their Sunday meetings are not planned in any sense of the word. Instead, they do what they call “sitting in silence” until someone, and it can be anyone, feels moved by the spirit and spontaneously gives a kind of testimonial on any topic at all. Because of this spontaneity in their religious services, not to mention their comfort level with silence, makes for an authenticity of religious praxis that is so mature that it is a wonder that their ranks remain small. But, then again, they don’t taint their religion with aggressive missionary activities, preferring instead to advance a public message, when they do break their silence, of absolute abstention from participating in violence even though the state may say it’s all right as in the case of war. Unfortunately, they went through a minor identity crisis when WWII revealed such an ugly face of evil that it made them question the absolutist nature of their ethic (I have mentioned this before, but it bears repeating).

Since the religious universe of worldviews is so large, it just may be that we won’t have to settle for a nauseous version. There are people like John Spong and Dominic Crossan who have very sensible views on (based on their writings we can get a way with term) the Christian Myth. A review of the books they have published shows a wonderful alternative to conventional Christian thinking. We might even be tempted to embrace “progressive” theology, the thing I mentioned before about God being capable of growth, where God is thought of as a more organic creature. The

Gospel writers so badly wanted their readers to accept Jesus as an actual God. The miracle narratives then begin to resemble a mere sales pitch. It can be difficult for those of us who don't share the Christians' point of view on Jesus just why they have to turn him into God can be puzzling when we don't understand why they just can't accept him as a great prophet, and let it lie there. Christians are absolutely obsessed with Jesus. One Catholic writer in the middle ages wrote a book called *The Spiritual Exercises*. The main point of the book was to give practical advice on meditation activities where the practitioner was asked to imagine him or herself in certain situations as the term *Imatito Christo*, or Imitation of Christ, began to emerge as the telos of the Christians' practice. I have already discussed the difficulties of trying to feel contemporaneous with Christ since a real danger exists that we would not be able to identify him as the person we now think he is.

Bart Ehrman is another name to keep in mind since he also has a much saner point of view on Jesus. Unfortunately, he can sometimes come across as an atheist so he may repulse some Christians. It may be hard to determine just how far he goes into that perspective given the amount of common sense and secularization of what we may think of as "inappropriate" Christian views, but the exercise of reading people who present alternatives to the orthodox perspective may help us open our minds and prevent magical thinking from gripping us with its ultimately silly conclusions.

The fact of the matter is, with the examination of the various views that exist in the Christian universe that we have looked into, the life of the religionist may not be all that bad if we just accept the variety and ignore the recent attacks against the Protestants by Catholics who, for some reason, feel compelled to tell them their theology is wrong,

meaning of course that the Catholics are the one true church. We might want to reject any claim that is this absolutist although we will be encountering it often in our search for a comfortable religion. The fact that we have this much choice in finding a religion we like, faces a subterranean fear that drives us into the arms of the religion that seems to be the most “correct.” This terrible desire to get it right, I keep bringing up because of its importance, seriously stunts the imaginative faculties that, if stimulated, opens up the field of Christian worldviews (I can’t help mentioning my favorite one, the Quakers) to a cornucopia of views that only have the appearance of competing with each other when there’s no reason to suppose that they aren’t equally effective at promoting a religious idea meant to appeal to the kind of personality most attracted to it. As we come to the close of our time immersing ourselves in the religionists’ point of view, we can begin to see that, due to the sheer variety, that we may not have to blindly fall into a horrible regard of the human personality as some kind of evil thing, which a lot of religions want to convince you of. The real point of life, after all, is to be happy, not to be right. If we really can’t get over a need for a God, and we find ourselves attracted to some form of Christian worldview, there may be a congenial way to work out what really works for you. I have to admit my Buddhist leanings now. And, in my belief in reincarnation, I once read a book about a psychologist who did past life regression. I couldn’t help agreeing with his conclusions. Evidently, there are three categories of spirits, beginners, intermediates, and advanced. There is also an in between time where we go to a certain place where we meet people whom we have befriended over the course of our earthly traversing. Discussions are often held on what kind of life they chose to have and there is much amusement about the stupid or ignorant choices we made. Eventually, of course, a

time for the next incarnation is scheduled, but some of the more advanced spirits he regressed revealed that they incarnate less and less as time goes on, and, instead participate in creation activities. They refer to a person whom they simply call the maker, and show hesitancy to talk about him. It quickly becomes obvious that this “maker” isn’t exactly a god, but some sort of higher intelligence, maybe not too unlike the Oversoul we discussed earlier. But, in the end, we all have to make a choice about what kind of life we will lead, what kind of moral rules we will follow, what kind of beliefs make sense to us, if any of them do at all.

Those who have a special sensitivity to the beauty of our world most prominently develop the idea that there needs to be a God. The more pressing issues of what kind of religion to ally with gets tamped down by this accurate reading of what it means to be humble. Keeping in mind that there are effective ways to nurture one’s own spirituality, whether or not you decide to adopt some version of God is really an exercise in discovering your own perceived spiritual needs. In supposing you don’t have any, it should be sufficient just to follow your chosen path because God doesn’t need us to feel like we are in the “right” religion, and perhaps would even frown on winding up fretting about what exactly we are supposed to do with our lives. As I’ve been emphasizing, God doesn’t consider an overly strenuous search for him as a program we should be slavishly devoted to. God simply is. His existence is just a curious fact of our being in the world. And he might not even be as hands off as we seem to think he is, especially since it is difficult to see his interfering hand. And now I would like to reveal a little bit of myself again.

As I began extracting myself from the Mormon perspective, I began to discover that I had unconsciously aligned myself with the mystics. Mystics are very comfortable with paradoxes. We don't feel a need for consistency since the mystical path through life is a lifelong process in which the program of faith terminates in a refusal to follow rules. What we are ultimately after is a way of regarding God that is stripped of the accretions of human thought that has compiled its compendium on his nature as if fitting him into an encyclopedia entry was a fulfilling method. Instead, we emphasize God's ineffability, which means that humans are actually incapable of understanding him. He is not consciously trying to reinforce ignorance but simply wants us to feel his playful side, so that in experiencing him, we realize all the shortcomings of an accurate understanding, preferring instead to sit in a situation of ambiguity that entrances of contact with that ineffability, however difficult to separate from merely an emotional experience, will confirm to us that God's absence is really a technique he employs to soften our hardheaded tendency to try to be "right."

While I was serving a mission in South Korea, I experienced a particularly depressing time. After suffering with this for some six months, I one day had a mystical experience. Somehow, I had the experience of something that I can only describe as a ball of power inhabiting my body, somewhere near the stomach region. This force then started drawing all the negative emotions and thoughts I'd been struggling with into it, and the end result was, that after a few weeks, I felt completely cheery and that the suffering had been removed.

Thirty years later, I was listening to a guided meditation CD that my wife had given me. The soft voice of the person speaking put me into a semi-hypnotic state. She

mentioned the presence of light beings being there with me to help me feel at peace. Then, in my mind's eye, I saw one of them separate from the others and walk towards me where it placed its "hand" on my stomach and said, "I was here." When I awakened into full consciousness, I realized that these beings really wanted me to understand the authenticity of what I had experienced in South Korea. As to the actual "reality" of the light beings, I cannot say. So much of the spirituality of the mystic is based on symbol and sign, so the experience struck me as somewhat metaphorical in nature, but it allowed me to accept that there are more things in heaven in earth than are contained in our philosophies, to badly quote Shakespeare.

A little later, I became concerned about my position on God because the way I talked about religious things sometimes made me sound like an atheist and at other times made me sound like a true believer such as suggesting that if there were a heaven and I got there, I would very much like to become an angel, a powerful angel meant to do battle in almost martial arts fashion with the forces that seek our doom. I had already been steeped in martial arts as I practiced Chinese Kung Fu, and I had even received an award from my school honoring my accomplishments in the art (I also practice Tai Chi). After some seventeen years of studying various forms of self-defense, steeping myself in the Buddhist orientation of my particular style (there are actually thousands of styles of Kung Fu, a number that seems staggering I know), and studying movement forms whose actual intent was to teach the practitioner about the various energies of the human body and how to work with and detect them in others (of course opponents, but sometimes we talked about inner demons).

In order to clarify where, exactly, I stood before God, I offered a prayer using the Mormon method (it was the only one I knew), but kept telling whoever I was praying to that I really didn't believe in him, contradiction noted, but such is the life of a mystic. After I finished the prayer, I really had no expectations about what would happen afterward. But then a curious thing happened. I thought I actually heard laughter. In this epiphany, I discerned the words that God loves his unbelievers because without them, there would only be one route and the Middle Ages would still be with us with all of its superstitions and wrong thinking. Then my attention was turned to the tale of the Prodigal Son, a person who left his devout father and then went out in the world to live a dissolute life, but he comes home, and his reception upon returning is met with unbounded joy. It was then that I realized the universality of prodigality and that Jesus was always trying to rescue that one stray sheep all the time. Of course, where I was returning to was not necessarily to a devout mansion where I instantly converted to the Christian idea of living life. But the experience gave me a window into the fondness God has for those who actually try to synthesize their own misguided perceptions with what is probably a more mature understanding of what religion is for.

Then, ten years later, my wife and I (she is Cambodian), moved to live in Phnom Penh, Cambodia where I began teaching in a university and we ended up moving there permanently. First, some background. While I was still living in Connecticut, I began to think about what's known as a Zen Koan. These are little puzzles the master gives to his disciples, actually paradoxes, for them to think about during meditation. I began to think about one of the most basic ones, the one that gets quoted a lot as an example of this practice. It asks the question: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" I spent months

mulling over a resolution and I even asked my wife what she thought and she said, “It’s impossible. One hand cannot clap without the other.” Obviously, she was unable to understand the task, but also her mind was just too literal for such a fanciful activity. But, gradually, I came to up with a solution, one among probably an infinite variety of possible interpretations. I began to understand the koan as an expression of wrath. When there is a lightning storm, and a thunderbolt streaks out of the sky, it divides the air into two parts, just for a moment, until the force of the two sides coming together leaves us with that huge thunderclap. The purpose of the koan, as is the purpose of all of them, is to get the individual to think in a new way about the world. I understood that the two hands were actually a division in a whole, the ether. The sound of one hand clapping is actually nature expressing its wrath upon the deluded individual who mistakenly thinks the world is real, as all the phenomena in nature have both a pleasurable and a wrathful side. The wrath we feel at the sound of a thunderclap is nature getting us to explore that more sudden, vivid, and sometimes violent expressions of nature as a method of getting us to see how puny we are in the scope of things. The awfulness of our fragility before forces that control us, we do not control them, belittles us into our rightful place in the universe as purely inconsequential beings who depend on the operation of nature to illuminate us on the actual status of reality.

Once I had thought of this, now back in Cambodia, I was standing on the balcony in our apartment. I started to think of the koan as I stared up into a starless sky. Suddenly, without realizing why, I began to think of the Christian edict to be perfect just like God. I then thought of how unsatisfying this Christian definition of perfection was as it was completely impossible to ever accomplish their ideal, which was acting without error or

flaw. Then I thought about the original Greek word that was used for “perfection,” particularly skewed in what was actually a misprision used by the writers of the King James Bible. The original Greek renders the connotation of harmony, not a flawless life. It was then that I realized the true intent of the saying of Jesus that we should be perfect was actually he telling his listeners to realize their oneness with the whole of humanity and even extended to the whole of the universe. I began to suddenly realize that I was indeed in a state of harmony and I reflected on my journey to this realization. I also realized, that after some forty years of reflection and experience, I had finally grown into the kind of person I had always wanted to be. I then felt all fear and anxiety leave my mind. The tremendous feeling of peace left me realizing that I had just experienced an enlightenment experience. I would joke with my wife that if I tried very hard, I could perhaps become a Buddha, but I am still too full of flaws to pursue this, and not only that, but the effort required would cause such a huge amount of renunciation that the task would be impossible in one lifetime. So I wait for the next one.

But let’s end with a little piece of advice. Most of all, don’t be credulous. Keep your critical thinking skills in place. Don’t be afraid to change your religious affiliation if you think it either stops making sense or begins weighing you down with ridiculous assumptions that attack your personality, no your very identity. The most sublime facility placed innately in the human being is the ability to ask questions. In fact, just in case you were wondering, questions are much more important than answers. The universe just doesn’t seem wired to give us access to the kind of answers we would actually like to have. Why are things this way? After all, if there were a god, he could have made the world and our destinies any way he liked, but the world seems designed to let inequalities

fester, allow incredible atrocities both in the name of God and in the service of some insane ideology, and foster petty differences that keep families apart for no other reason than pride has collided with good sense and the more corrosive element wins. So, in the end, the best way to stay out of hell is to nullify the concept with a sweeping realization that hell is very well an invention to scare children just like the fairy tales we tell our children at bedtime were originally meant to scare them into good behavior. Avoiding childishness, which is often a place of fear like the monster under the bed or the particularly bad dream, is to allow the forces of maturity to work on us, until finally, wisdom emerges (something I denigrated before, but here I am using it in a different way). What this means is that we accept the vagaries implanted in the structure of the universe, all the unanswerable questions, all the fears and dangers of pursuing our own path. But the only thing that matters, ultimately, is to love. So here I end. Hell is not bigger than heaven because despite the shortcomings of God, he simply loves us too much for the idea of hell to ever take root as a real phenomenon, a real place. Once we have the courage to love, and for some reason, this is not an easy task, the radiance of compassion falls all about us like stars falling from the sky and in their fallen position, they still choose to shine, their beams of light pumping almost like little inanimate hearts where, with you in the spotlight, the nonsense of life reverses itself in a sudden epiphany that humanity, in all its muck and slime, is an inhabitant in a special moment in time, occupying a preeminent place in the universe, for our very existence is the true miracle and the more humane our civilization becomes, there will be a distant point in the future where everything that rises must converge, and in our new natural states we will see that heaven is actually itself a very lowly, humble, and common idea as the progress of

humanity has merged all differences into a multi-pointed uniqueness, the hallowing of the individual in a harmonious blend, for this is the proper definition of perfection: harmony. Once we have realized this great truth, enlightenment will spread like a benign virus, spreading farther and farther across the face of the world until compassion and love will manufacture a new reality, and if God has left us to our own devices, we will have proven him correct in creating us because we will have learned to manage ourselves and the world with the probity of a God. But not in the supernatural context, in the idea that sublimity rules the emotions flowing from this single source of love, which, however, fills the universe with its influence and when we bow our knees, the prayer flowing from our lips will praise, not be praise itself, and the thing it praises is the incredible revelation that heaven is the invention of a united humanity, a true utopia made by the hands of man so self-assured that this, this thing so hard to accomplish, is in fact the very thing that makes us unique and blended at the same time. We call this elusive thing: love.

