

PART 2: General Background

Chapter 2.01 Avoiding Common Mistakes

This part of the book is only on the Internet. I have not edited this material very much so it might be a little rough. I intend to rework this material to put in a book (for the Internet) that compares religious stances and life stances.

This chapter is a long list of common mistakes about religion. You can skip it if you have a good background in philosophy, theology, or social science. Skim it for anything that catches your eye. In later chapters I refer to some of these mistakes but I also provide enough background where needed so that you do not have to come back here to know what I am talking about. The discussions here are fuller so, if you do come back, you might enjoy it.

This list does not include every mistake. Many are natural and hard to avoid. Sometimes I commit these mistakes myself. When I do, and I see it, I say so, and tell you why. If we never commit any mistakes, we end up with an austere religion that is focused on moral behavior. I do not expect most people to be so austere. We can still make a few of these mistakes and not betray our better ideals.

The Bible is Not Infallible.

This idea is self-explanatory. The Bible is not an objective explanation of history, biology, physics, political science, or even of theology. It is a collection of stories, some of which are based on real historic events, and some of which convey messages about morality, life, and God. Some messages are good and some bad. The Bible is not consistent, and it can be contradictory. It is not self-evident. It requires interpretation. Various interpretations differ and cannot be reconciled. It makes sense to say that God spoke through the Bible, but that does not mean we have to accept every line as literally true or as binding. The Bible has a lot of bad stuff in it, such as genocide, which we cannot take as binding. We have to evaluate every statement for ourselves. The Bible does not speak to many modern issues such as cloning. Many issues we have to decide for ourselves independently of the Bible such as whether or not to have national health care. Even when the Bible is clear on some issues such as helping the poor, many Christians apparently decide for themselves not to follow it. For issues that we cannot decide ourselves and on which the Bible does speak, we can fall back on the Bible as a reference. In those cases, do not forget the potential for dispute. If we really cannot decide for ourselves about divorce, we can fall back on the fact that the Old Testament allowed men to have more than one wife and allowed men to divorce women but not women to divorce men, or that Jesus seems to allow only monogamy and seems to forbid divorce, or that Paul and Matthew seem to allow both divorce and remarriage in some cases.

Balance and Judgment.

We can avoid many mistakes by seeking a balance between tendencies, sometimes between two opposing tendencies, and sometimes between more than two. We can be too strict with our children or

too lax. In law, we can seek the common ground between justice, mercy, and strictness. So seek the balanced middle first to see if that makes best sense.

Passion.

Sometimes the balanced middle is not the best position. We can be like the ass that starved to death because it stood between two exactly equal stacks of hay and could not choose between them. That is what passion is for sometimes. It can be better to make any choice, even a slightly wrong choice, than to make no choice at all. When we decide, usually we should act with clear commitment and not vacillate.

“No” to “Nothing But” and Reductionism; “Yes” to Essentialism.

People used to laugh at Freudianism because it seemed to say that everything was nothing but frustrated adolescent sex: cigars, football, striving at work, erecting tall buildings, etc. Other “isms” have their own “nothing but” too. Some religion sees human misery as nothing but the devil or nothing but a bad human will. Bleeding hearts see all bad behavior as the result of curable misguidance, as when Riff in “West Side Story” says, “I’m depraved on account of I’m deprived”. Batman movies and graphic novels are nothing but pop culture silliness. Classical music is nothing but elitism.

“Nothing but” “explains away”. “Nothing but” reduces something so much that it loses its identity. We want to be able to explain but we do not want to explain away unless explaining away is right. It makes sense to explain by saying that something is an instance of something else but it can be misleading to explain away through “nothing but”. Watching TV, golf, drinking, listening to music, watching trees sway, and figuring out a mathematical theorem are all fun but they are not “nothing but” fun. Each is fun in its own way and each is something besides fun too.

A dog is a large, complicated electrochemical machine designed by evolution but it also can be our best friend, a lot of fun, and it might even be a little soul. Spot the dog is an electrochemical machine but is also more than “nothing but” an electrochemical machine. People name their cars just because the car acts very much like it is alive and has a personality. We do not want to explain away Spot the dog or Betsy the car.

Of course, a big part of explanation is reducing, and sometimes reducing is the right thing to do. If we want to fix our car, we have to think of how it is made and how it works rather than its name and personality. We have to think of it as nothing but nuts and bolts, at least for the present needs. If Spot gets sick, then the veterinarian has to think of him as an electrochemical machine.

Sometimes something is two or more things at the same time, and we are not sure which takes priority when or how to handle the overall blending. American football is both a sport and a war. Social parties are both sport and war. A walk in the woods is fresh air, exercise, appreciating nature, and a chance to see the principles of biology in the flesh. A motorcycle is basic transportation, a great ride, and art. A painting covers a spot on the wall and brings us to esthetic rapture.

Sometimes we use “nothing but” when we want to get to the heart of a matter. We might not mean to distort but we have to get things done, and we are willing to lose some detail to find out “what is going

on” so that we can act or not act. When we hear about a fight between the neighbors, we want to know that our car is not damaged, what they were really fighting about, who got hurt how, if they are liable to carry a grudge, and if the fight will spill over on to us. We do not want to know if the shouting upset the dog for a while. If they are really fighting because somebody’s wife flirted with somebody’s husband, we want to know that; we do not care if they used the excuse that somebody’s bumper stuck out into the driveway. We do not want to know what they were wearing or if the sky was overcast. We do not even care if somebody called the police unless the police changed the basic situation. Seeking the heart of a matter is called looking for the essence. Looking for the essence is out of fashion now in philosophy and social science but people still do it because it makes sense. Even social scientists that deny seeking the essence still see the essence of social relations in power.

We seek the essential Jesus without reducing Jesus to “nothing but”. Jesus might have been both a moral teacher and the Son of God who got crucified to save us from our sins, but we want to know which is more important. We want to know what is really going on. It might not be appropriate to seek the essential Jesus, but it is natural to try, and the trying often leads to good results that we did not intend. We seek the essence of Jesus without reducing Jesus to nothing but some ideology or idealization.

We have to look for all the possibilities, to look for the most important possibility if there is one, not to rest on our favorite alternative as the essence if it is not the essence, and to stress alternatives properly. If one alternative is really the essence, then say so. This kind of care in assessing takes practice, but a lot of people do it in their businesses and family lives because they have to.

Philosophers have not decided when to insist on “nothing but”, when to insist on something besides “nothing but”, how to do both at the same time, and what we end up with when we do reduce or do not reduce. Philosophers have not decided if everything has an essence, and, if so, how always to find the essence. So we have to find balance for ourselves between seeing things in terms of parts or wholes, and how to see one thing as many things at the same time. We have to decide if a think has an essence, if we can seek the essence, and if finding an essence is reducing the thing to “nothing but”. Even if we can reduce something entirely to its parts and workings, it still might have an identity that we have to consider. Even if something is clearly one thing at one time, it does not lose its ability to be other things at other times, and its total identity is not summed up in the one thing at the one time. Sometimes morality is about doing the right thing, sometimes about following a rule, sometimes about the good of everybody, sometimes about rights, and sometimes about duties. We have to decide which when how much. We have to think about what religious realities we want to take seriously. We have to think about whether or not we can reduce God, prayer, morality, and human relations to nothing but something else such as fear of life, and if we want to. Even if we can reduce them to “nothing but” in one way, does that stop also seeing them as something in their own right in another way? Even if religion is nothing but an evolved defense mechanism (like Spot the dog) does that fact mean it is not also true too? Even if Jesus is nothing but a Jewish eschatological prophet does that mean he is not also correct? I do not answer the questions now but you will see me dancing around them in the pages below, and I return to them in the part of the book on sociobiology.

Animism.

People tend to see things as alive and as having intent even when we know they are not and do not. Cartoons on TV are not alive, and we know they are not, but we prefer to see them alive anyhow. If you shine two flashlight beams, and make one dot chase another, a spectator will see the two dots as alive and as having a purpose. You can make one dot hide, another seek, one jump up and down in panic, another jump up and down in joy, one tease, the other get angry in response, and so on. We tend to see the world this way. Dragons hide in clouds hiding in them even when we know they do not. Brooks murmur. Trees sway. A stick in the road is a snake, not just a stick. Thunder is god's anger. Hurricanes are god's punishment.

Of course, some things really are alive, and many living things really have intent and passion. Bears are large walking electrochemical machines but they are not only that. They are alive. They have intentions. They have passions. They use their neural-chemical-mechanical abilities to express their life and passions. We would be foolish not to think of them that way. The same is true of other people and of our self too.

It is a mistake both to make the world too lively and to make it not lively enough. It is a bigger mistake to make the world not lively enough. We can survive thinking a-stick-is-a-snake-when-it-is-really-a-stick while we might die thinking a-snake-is-a-stick-when-it-is-really-a-snake. It is a lot of fun to make the world lively as long as we do not go overboard.

Sometimes we see God behind many things when really we should see other forces at work such as gravity for a waterfall, the diffraction of light for a rainbow, strategy for winning a war, and genes for causing cancer. Sometimes God is behind some things even when other forces are obviously at work. God might have used evolution to design the bear. We need not rule out the possibility as long as we do not go too far and too often.

We make a mistake if we see some kind of spirit behind everything that might be big, unusual, unique, powerful, fearful, cute, interesting, or generic. People tend to see spirits behind big mountains, big rivers, big animals, waterfalls, the weather, the planets, or a species such as "the bear spirit". Even if there were more than one kind of spirit, we still have to think about what to best explain in terms of spirit and what to best explain in terms of physics, chemistry, and biology alone. We can use both kinds of explanation at the same time as long as we do not get too confused.

Scientists can explain almost anything in terms of only physics, chemistry, and biology, and I go along with them. But I do not let their success rob me of seeing the world as alive when that is fun and not misleading. It is only human to see the world both ways.

We cannot explain God in terms of science or in the same terms that we would use to explain any lesser spirit such as the tree spirit.

Divine Gift.

Between people, giving and taking mean something. Even between animals, or between people and animals, giving and taking can mean something. Giving and taking help make bonds and relations. If I give something to somebody, I expect someday to get something back. I hope we can keep up the giving-and-taking and the relation. If I loan a friend a music cd of mine, I hope someday to borrow one

of his. If I give a biscuit to a dog, the dog takes me as a friend and acts accordingly. If the other person never gives anything back, then I know the other person does not want a relation with me. If I never get my CD back, and never get the offer of a DVD, then I can give up on that person as a friend.

If the other person is a lot bigger and more powerful than me, I might give the other person a gift so that I can get something from him-her that I could not get myself or could not get from anybody else. If I give something to the big powerful person, and the big powerful person accepts the gift, then I have a pretty good hope that he-she will give me what I want.

People that believe in spirits think we can get into a relation with the spirit by giving the spirit a gift. Both attitudes are wrong. There are not small spirits, so we cannot get into a relation with them by giving. Even though there is a God, we cannot cajole God with gifts. I could never understand why God might want a burned dead animal or even a wreath of flowers. We cannot even give God something like a gift (not drinking beer for Lent), or a task (working for the homeless for a month), or a pilgrimage (going to Notre Dame Cathedral or the birthplace of Luther). If we want something, we can just ask for it, but we should not be too hopeful.

The only real gift we can give to God is a good heart. The only benefits of a gift to God are that the gift might show our intent, and it might help us to understand our selves. The gift is more about us than about God or our relation with God. We can think of it as a gift to God as long as we do not get confused. I say more about this topic in later parts of the book.

No Negotiating.

Giving a gift to God in the hope of getting something good back is a kind of negotiating with God. We cannot negotiate with God. As Jim Morrison whined disrespectfully in the 1960s, "You cannot petition the lord with prayer". We cannot ask things like, "If you only save me from this sinking ship, I will say a special prayer everyday for all the rest of my life". We cannot even ask really laudable things like, "If you save my daughter Amy from cancer, you can kill me right now, or you can give me her cancer instead". In some cases, such as with a sick relative, it is impossible not to try negotiating like this, and I doubt that it hurts much to try. But we should not expect to have our prayers answered, and we should not get angry when they are not answered. I do not know what not being able to negotiate implies about the kind of relation we can have with God or about the place of prayer.

One of my favorite passages in the Bible is in Genesis. Abraham negotiates with God about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. God says he will not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if there are only twenty righteous men, but there are not. Abraham quibbles about the number, saying, "well, if twenty is enough, how about fifteen?" God says, "OK then, fifteen". By clever wheedling steps, Abraham gets God down to five. The Bible does not say anything about righteous women. Unfortunately for the twin cities, there were not even five, so God smoked the place anyway.

Abraham did negotiate with God in the Bible, but that does not mean it really happened, that we could do it, or that it applies in all cases. Abraham did not negotiate to get something for himself or for a loved one. Abraham did not give God a gift to butter God up. Abraham negotiated on behalf of humanity, decency, and mercy in general. We could do the same. I am not sure if negotiating on behalf of the

greater good would help but I see little harm in trying if we feel up to it. Abraham's example shows us that we can have a relation with God and what a relation might be like. Humor and irony play big parts.

No Bookkeeping.

God does not assign points to good deeds and bad deeds. There are no points. So we cannot add good points or add bad points. We cannot subtract bad points from good points. We cannot use good points to overcome bad points. We cannot use good deeds to make up for bad deeds. Bad deeds do not erase good deeds. We do not go to heaven if the sum of good points exceeds the sum of bad points. We do not go to hell if the sum of bad points exceeds the sum of good points. How long we spend in heaven or hell does not depend on our point total. We should stop thinking of points at all. God might have a long memory but he does not keep books. The Buddhist idea of points is usually translated as "merit". There is no "merit keeping" either.

No Transfer.

Since we do not have points, we cannot transfer points and we cannot get points transferred to us. We cannot use our good points to ease our sick brother, or to get God to make our sister see the stupidity of alcoholism. They cannot do the same for us. We cannot transfer our good points to our dead mother to get her out of purgatory faster. We cannot transfer our good points to our dead father to get him a better rebirth. Everybody has to make do on his-her own.

Better than Achilles.

As a Greek, I like Homer. The lesson of the Iliad is the need to be a good citizen of both the human world and the moral world. The movie "Troy", with Brad Pitt as Achilles and Eric Bana as Hector, gets across the message well. The Greeks came to besiege Troy. Achilles was the unstoppable warrior for the Greeks. He had a huge chip on his shoulder, took nothing from nobody, and quickly avenged any slight. Hector was Prince of Troy, a great warrior too, but, more importantly, a great man who put decency and the fate of his people over himself. Achilles thought that Hector had wronged him but Achilles was mistaken. Achilles killed Hector and abused his body. Hector's father, King Priam, came to Achilles to beg for Hector's body so as to perform the needed rites. Achilles had to stop thinking that it was all about him and all about honor. Achilles had to see that Hector was a better man than him even if Achilles was the better fighter. Achilles had to realize that respect for the dead Hector, and for the religious beliefs of his kin, was important even if Achilles thought Hector had wronged him. Achilles had to put decency ahead of honor, and he had to see that decency has a lot to do with social life. Achilles became a good citizen.

After returning Hector's body, the gods arrange for Achilles to die. Achilles did not die because he saw the greater good. Being a good citizen does not kill the spirit within. Being a good citizen does not necessarily prevent you from being a free spirit Romantic rebel salt of the earth in touch with the underbelly walking on the wild side. Maybe Achilles died because there was no longer a place for the old Achilles in the better world of decency and good citizenship, as there was no place for Butch Cassidy or the Sundance Kid in the developing modern world.

We have to go as far as Achilles, and then we have to go even farther. We have to be good citizens in that we have to respect decency and normal social relations. We also have to be good citizens of the Kingdom. We have to strive for something better. We cannot rest only with being good citizens, with only voting, only voting the right way, paying taxes, or supporting the right political causes. We have to think about right and wrong, and then we have to actively do things to advance right and wrong, at least in situations under our control. We have to go beyond passive decency to active decency. We have to go beyond Achilles to be the Good Samaritan.

I do not know if being a good citizen in the way of Hector or Achilles impedes being a good citizen of the Kingdom of God in the way of the Good Samaritan. I can imagine cases where it is more important to be a good citizen of the Kingdom of God than to be a good citizen of Troy or Greece. Jesus died because he was being a good citizen of the Kingdom of God rather than of Rome. I do not know if being a good citizen of the Kingdom of God makes you a Romantic rebel and qualifies you to flaunt normal citizenship but I doubt it. It does not give you the right to flaunt decency. Most of the time being a good citizen in the way of Hector and Achilles is the best preparation for being a good citizen of the Kingdom of God. Using the idea of moral superiority to indulge in romanticism about yourself is to go back to what Achilles was before he met Hector.

Better Than Family Values.

Just as Jesus requires us to be more than good citizens, so also Jesus requires more than family values. There is nothing wrong with family values nearly all of the time, and there is much right with them nearly all the time. But family values are not the same as the teachings of Jesus, and they cannot substitute for the teachings of Jesus. To substitute family values for the teachings of Jesus is the same thing as to substitute romantic self-indulgence for the teachings of Jesus. It is to come short of the mark.

The Greater Good Undoes the Lesser Good.

Being a citizen of the Kingdom of God can require us to be a bad citizen of the civil state sometimes, as when we refuse to follow a bad law or refuse bad military service. Being a member of the family of God can require us to be a bad family member sometimes, as when we allow a person to have freedom of choice even when we can see that the person might make a bad choice, and even when that person is our child or the child of a family in our community. A greater good can sometimes undo a lesser good. Advocates of family values often can see the first case but not the second.

This is really dangerous ground. I do not know of any hard-and-fast rules here. This is where we need both rules and judgment. I cannot say more here.

Not Morally Right Because It Is Useful.

I make this mistake a lot, as do most people that think they have the ability to tell other people about religion and social life. We want to make good whatever we find useful.

A quick way to see this mistake is through a particular version called "Pascal's Wager". Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician and philosopher in the 1600s. He pioneered the mathematics of probability,

chiefly to help gamblers that asked him how to bet. He also used logic to defend Roman Catholicism. He said, "You are a gambler. You do not know for sure that God exists or does not exist. Suppose you bet that God does not exist by leading an indulgent life, and God does exist. In that case, you lose a lot. Suppose you bet that God does exist by leading a good life. If God does exist, you gain a lot. If God does not exist, you might lose a little; but you would not lose nearly as much as if God did exist and you led an indulgent life. So the smart thing to do is live as if God existed." Maybe. I do not like his logic. I do not want to believe in God because it is convenient. I want to believe because of what is in my heart, because I think it is true. If God does exist, I want to face up and do what is needed. If God does not exist, I want to face up and do what is needed. I do not want to run my life on hedges. I want to make a commitment that reflects my belief.

Moral logic is just different than strategic logic. Yet the two are bound together. I think moral logic originated historically (evolutionarily) from practical logic. But they have since parted ways, and we cannot reduce one to another. We have to accept the force of both, and see how they interact. A funny and poignant version of the mistake of this section shows up in the song "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" where children get a taste both of moral problems and of philosophical problems with omniscience.

"He knows when you are sleeping
He knows when you're awake
He knows when you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness' sake"

The philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer said, "We cannot will to will". He did not mean only that there are some actions that do not work on themselves, although there are some actions that do not work on themselves. Schopenhauer meant that there are some actions that are starting points in themselves that we cannot get beneath. We can usually recognize foundation actions if we think of them in terms of willing. Westerners think of deep emotions, tastes, commitments, values, and preferences this way. When we will something, we just will it. We cannot do anything to create a will for something. We cannot love democracy just because we would like to love democracy if we do not really love democracy. If we love democracy, then we just love democracy. You cannot will to love Nancy because you should love Nancy. Either you love her or you do not love her. You cannot fake some actions. "Willing" and "believing" are in themselves. They work on something else but cannot work on themselves and nothing else can work on them. We can will to climb a mountain but we cannot will to believe. We can only believe in something because we think it is true. We cannot will to believe the sky is green if we really think it is blue. We cannot will to believe in Jesus' resurrection just because to do so gets us to heaven. We can only believe it or not. Later in the book I break these rules somewhat but they are true enough for now.

Another version of the mistake: "We should judge an idea according to its social consequences. Even if an idea is a little bit wrong, we should judge it according to its social consequences. Whether God exists or not does not matter as much as the social consequences of belief or disbelief. People that do not believe in God are much less moral than people that do believe in God, any God. Non-believers are not as honest. They cause a lot of crime and social problems. We cannot rely on them in business. In contrast, believers fit into society better. So we should promote the idea of God so as to make people

behave better, make business prosper, and make society run better.” This idea is common among politicians, business people, and religious leaders. I have even seen eminent economists suggest it, and even jokingly say that the state should pay the salaries of preachers as public servants.

I do not like this version either, for the same reasons I do not like Pascal’s wager and for another reason too. First, as against Pascal, I want to believe because I think what I believe is true, not because what I believe is useful for me or makes the city run well.

Second, how wrong does an idea have to be before we have to see that truth is more important than social order? When leaders want people to believe so as to promote order regardless of truth, then people who seek the truth regardless of social consequences become enemies of the state and they also become heroes. The people that want the state to run well but bend reality to do so are necessarily bad guys. The bad guys are the good guys, the good guys are the bad guys, all politicians must be evil, and the city does not work well after all. See “V” for Vendetta”, countless movies on uncovering secret government plots, and Republicans on global climate change. Maybe the way to make society better is not to try too hard to make it run better, or at least not to try too hard by bending the truth.

Atheists and agnostics have their own version of this mistake. They justify their morals not by saying their morals are objectively true but by saying their morals help society to work better. “Do not murder” is morally true not because murder is wrong but because not murdering makes society run better. A rule is morally true if it helps society run better and morally false if it does not. Some versions would say a moral rule is true if it increases my reproductive success and false if it hurts my reproductive success, but we can avoid thinking about those versions until later in the book. I do not count moral rules as true because they make society work better but because they are morally true. I want to act on morals because they are right even if my actions impede society a bit. The problem gets harder: When I subordinate moral truth to the idea of making society work better, I really have no standard for what a better society is. I cannot say that a better society is a more truthful society because truth is what works within society as society defines what works. I cannot say a happier society is a better society because I have no standard to say that happier is better unless society tells me that happiness is better. I need some moral standard outside of society to judge whether or not society is working better, and so I cannot establish my morality (my standard) by its results within society.

We cannot always decide questions like the existence of God or whether some particular act is morally right or wrong, and we often have to act anyway. When we do act, we should take into account the consequences of our actions. But we should not try to back-think so as to convince ourselves that what we do is true because it is useful. We need to think about whether it is independently right or not.

Good God. Good is logically different from God. Something is not good just because God wills it. If God willed something, I could be pretty sure God willed it, and doing it did not entail anything immoral, then I would try to do it. But I would not be doing it because it is good.

If I was sure that God wished me to kill an innocent child, or even an innocent kitten, I could not do it. I cannot do something that is immoral just because God wishes me to do it. Suppose that we accept an authority over us. Being willing to commit an immoral act just because that authority wishes it is a sign of depravity, not uprightness. In the movie “Batman Begins”, Bruce Wayne leaves his mentor (Liam

Neeson) because his mentor wants him to murder a defenseless man. The man is a criminal, has evaded the law, and will not be punished unless by Bruce Wayne; but still the man is helpless, and Bruce Wayne refuses to just murder him. Anikin Skywalker becomes Darth Vader when he learns to kill at the Emperor's request regardless of who the victims are. He learns this even before he becomes a machine. Becoming a machine is only the final stage in his transformation. David Webb becomes Jason Bourne when he willingly kills a helpless, bound, hooded man just because his CIA developer urges him to do it. He begins to undo Jason Bourne when he cannot kill a bad man without also killing the man's innocent daughter, and so he does not kill the bad man. Suicide bombing of civilians is wrong even if God wills it. Collective punishment of civilians because some among them are terrorists is wrong even if God wills it.

We like to think that God would not do anything immoral or amoral or that God would not want us to do anything immoral or amoral. The Book of Joshua might cause us to reconsider because God encourages the Hebrews to commit immoral genocide. At least, God allows evil. So God might not do anything immoral or amoral but there is no clear one-to-one relation between God and morality. God created a world in which morality was very important, but he also made a world with a logical distinction between himself and morality.

So we still carry the burden of having to think out the morality of acts and ideas for ourselves, and we cannot just rely on the opinion of a religious leader as to the mind of God.

One of the most famous stories in the Bible is of Abraham and Isaac. Isaac is Abraham's only son. God tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, and Abraham is willing to do it. At the last minute, when God is sure of Abraham's intent, God stops Abraham. This is horrible, even if God did stop Abraham. I can give this story a spin that makes it a bit easier to take, but I do not want to let spin distract me from my main repulsion. It is wrong to ask someone to do something wrong. God would not do it. It is wrong to do something wrong just because an authority asks you to do it. God should not do it. I get back to this story later in the book.

God and Evil.

Evil cannot be reconciled with a god that is all-powerful (omnipotent) and all-knowing (omniscient). No theology I have read has bridged this gap. Evil can only exist because God allows it. If God allows it, then God is partly to blame for the evil.

If free will cannot exist without the possibility of evil, and it is better to have free will with evil than to have no evil and no free will (see the movie "Time Bandits"), then God might be limited in his power. At the least, God might have better prepared us for the combination. If some evil was inevitable with free will, God might have found a way to limit evil to less than what we see in this world.

Allowing a devil into the equation does not solve the problem. The devil is less powerful than God, and so God could prevent the devil from doing too much evil, but God does not.

Limiting the power of God does solve the problem but it raises other problems, and it is not allowable under strict Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

Allowing multiple gods can solve the problem but that raises other problems and it is not allowable under Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. In fact, the devil in the popular versions of those religions is another god, and so the popular versions of those religions are polytheistic and not correct.

Calling God "the Dharma" does not solve the problem because the Dharma is intrinsically morally good and should not allow evil any more than does God. Calling God "the Tao" does not solve the problem even if the Tao is only vaguely moral because the Tao does not allow for evil intrinsically within itself. God might explain this problem to people after they are dead but that solution does not help the living. As far as I know, nobody has come back from the dead to solve this problem for us, not even Jesus. So living people have no solution.

We the living must learn to live with the problem. Mostly we learn to live with it by fighting evil and by trying to reduce evil. That seems reasonable to me under the circumstances.

Not God of the Hearth.

People strongly tend to seek religious validation for their way of life: God loves businesspeople, or the working class, or intellectuals, or families. God might love all those people but I doubt that he loves any of them in particular, or blesses their way of life in particular. If he does, Jesus was wrong about diversity.

People seem to need a god as the patron of family life in general, of their kind of family life in particular, and even of their own families. In Rome and China, ancestors became minor gods who defended their descendants. In traditional Mormon Utah, God wanted polygyny (one man with several wives). In the Old Testament, God helped the Israelites proliferate in part by approving polygyny, and God tolerated prostitution. Yet now in America, God wants us all to be strictly monogamous, to be celibate at marriage, to have only one sexual partner our entire lives, and never to use prostitutes. Now in America, God helps the right families and punishes people that do not have the right families. Now in America, for many people, as in many other religions of the world, that is the principal role of God.

God's principal role is not protector of family values, any kind of family values. God is not primarily the god of the hearth. God dislikes immorality, including some kinds of sexual immorality and some kinds of family immorality. We should not have incest with our children. Still, God did not have only one kind of family in mind, and God does not take a highly active role in protecting that kind of family. Later in the book I talk again about the relation between God and families.

No Rapid Punishment and Reward.

God does not punish and reward us now for our deeds in this life. God might punish and reward us in this life sometimes, but, if so, it is beyond my knowledge. I know of no case that I can attribute to divine justice. We do have to reckon with God after we die, but we do not reckon while still alive except in prayer. If we murder our annoying neighbor with the yappy dogs, God does not punish us. If he did, there would be much less murder. If we save a drowning child, God does not reward us. If he did, there would be many more heroic acts.

The flip side of this mistake is more important. If something bad happens to us, it is not because God is angry with us and has punished us. That is called “blaming the victim”. If something bad happens to a person, he-she should not feel guilty on top of the bad event, and should not search for some sin to make up for. If a girl is raped, that is bad enough, and it did not happen because she provoked it. If a hurricane hits Alabama, it is not because Alabama put the lottery up for decision by the voters. If I get a flat tire on the freeway, it is not because I yelled at my wife. In the same way, but in the other direction, if I win the lottery, it is not because I am especially good. If being good could win the lottery, I would be very good. The movies sometimes have nuns winning a big bet on a long shot in a horse race to save the convent, but that does not happen in real life no matter how much we wish it would. Health, wealth, and success are not rewards for being righteous, and we should not take them as signs that way. Sickness, poverty, and failure are not punishments for sin, and we should not take them as signs that way.

One version of this mistake is funny. After a town in Pennsylvania decided to keep Creationism out of its school textbooks, Pat Robertson warned them that God would send disasters such as storms, earthquakes, and plagues. Nothing happened, so maybe God approved of their decision and disagreed with Pat Robertson. During the Bush administration, America has faced an unprecedented line up of natural disasters including Hurricane Katrina, drought in the Southeast, and fires in California. In my head, I know this is only coincidence but sometimes in my heart I wish this were divine punishment for the arrogance and un-democratic conniving of the “Bushies”.

One version of this mistake is sad. People sometimes think that, if only they are good enough, then things have to turn out all right. At the risk of being sexist, I have seen this attitude mostly among girls and young women aged about 10 to 30. I do not know why. People with this attitude try so hard to be good that they twist their lives. If things do not turn out as they hoped, they blame themselves and they sift their lives looking for the tiny fault that provoked God.

God does not primarily want to make you rich. The “prosperity gospel” of the televangelists not only is false, it is also likely immoral. According to the Old Testament, God did make some of the patriarchs rich as a way to promote their offspring and the Hebrews. But he did not make all the patriarchs, judges, or prophets rich. Most of us are not prophets and will not found a nation.

Morality Does Not Require Reward and Punishment.

This mistake is related to the idea that people have to believe in God to be good for society. Most people are mostly moral without fearing punishment for a bad deed and without expecting a reward for a good deed. This is part of what it means to be an adult.

I am not saying that all people are saints and that we can do away with the courts and police. Everybody makes mistakes, and some people make a lot of mistakes. Some people hurt other people. Some people cannot control themselves. We need the courts and the police.

I am saying that no amount of courts and police would be enough to control the people if the people did not have a lot of self-control. The overwhelming vast majority of bad deeds die as fantasies in the hearts of generally good people, and we need it to be that way. People internalize morality and that is a good thing.

The courts and police probably do discourage some people that are ordinarily moral but might transgress sometimes if they did not think they would be caught and punished. I probably would kill my neighbor's yappy dogs if I thought I could get away with it because I have rationalized killing them to the point where I do not think it would be immoral anymore.

Some people think that people in general would be a lot less moral if people in general did not fear divine punishment or did not hope for divine reward, and so some people promote God as vindictive, as a giant mean ever-watching parent with a big switch in his hand. Do not trespass on the church lawn or God will give you gangrene in your sinning feet. I do not agree. People just do not fear divine punishment the way they fear the courts and police. Fear of divine punishment might stop a murder now and then but I doubt that it stops nearly as much embezzlement as does a good forensic accountant. We do not need to hold up God as a giant mean parent with a switch in hand so that we can get people to act well. I think people that say we need divine reward and punishment do so mostly because they claim to be able to specify for God just what behaviors we are to be rewarded or punished for, and so are able to control their fellows to their own advantage.

People do not give to charity because they expect God to reward them in this life, and probably do not give because they expect God to reward them in the next life either. They give because they know it is good.

Some sin leads to its own punishment and some virtue leads to its own reward. As Dickens so ably showed in several books, if we are mean to all our neighbors then we are liable to be miserable, and if we are good to our neighbors then we are liable to rest easy at night. If we are good to our children, they are liable to turn out well. They might even take care of us in our old age. But we should not confuse these natural connections with divine intervention.

Absolute Same.

In the movie "The Matrix", Agent Smith is the devil. The machines made him, but then he transformed, and now not even his makers can stop him. His chief goal, and main technique, is his ability to make everyone exactly like himself. When he has made everyone exactly like himself, then he no longer has to put up with the diverse smells and tastes of the pseudo-liquid-pseudo-organic matrix world. Many stories in Western civilization have variations on this theme.

Movements of all kinds, religious, political, and intellectual, are like Agent Smith. They make everybody within the same. Even worse, often they want everybody in the world, in or out of the movement, to be the same too. People that cannot be the same are condemned. Despite declarations of diversity, among the people most determined to make everyone like themselves are some politically correct (PC) people I have met, including atheists, rock-n-roll bad girls, and liberal Christians. Conservative Christians and Muslims are little different. After the sociobiology movement gained strength, I realized I had some differences with it. I had several unhappy moments with prominent leaders as they tried to "straighten me out".

So it seems as if the answer is some kind of real diversity and not merely the slogan diversity of PC. But this cannot be quite true either. Remember Achilles. We want someone like Achilles in our world to protect us from the bad guys but not if he is out of control and hurts us. Not if he becomes a bad guy. I do not know about you, but I do not want people that are rude, trashy, dirty, loud, have yappy dogs, otherwise intrude on neighbors, or make it harder to live in the world. I want people that get the idea of decency. I want somebody like Achilles to force louts to behave decently even if they cannot get the idea of decency on their own. Diversity is good but within some limits.

Groups have an identity. Even when people do not cause trouble through bad manners, it is important that they understand the group identity, conform to the group identity, and actively support it. If they do not understand the group identity, they are liable to accidentally go against it. If you sign up for Boy Scouts, you have to get the idea of a Boy Scout or you are liable to betray it. People that do not really get the sense of a group cannot make up much of the membership or the group will fall.

So within a group we want people that both understand basic decency and that get the group identity. Whether we like it or not, any group has to be made up mostly of almost Agent Smiths or it will fall. Now we come to a basic problem of democracy. A democracy cannot have too many louts or it will fall. People that do not get the ideas of decency and democracy cannot make up most of the citizens or the democracy will fall. But a democracy is not a voluntary organization. If you are born in it, or immigrate into it, you are a part of it whether or not you are a lout and whether or not you get the idea. If too many louts or stubborn people live in a democracy, it will fall.

Christianity shares some of the same problems as a democracy. It cannot have too many louts and the members have to really get it. Not everybody is naturally accepting and forgiving. People do not always transform to be accepting and forgiving just because they happen to see the importance of Jesus. Churches cannot have too many stubborn hard-hearted people or they fall. On the other hand, if churches are too soft, they fall too. People take advantage of diversity and forgiveness. Non-Christians accept things from Christians but never give back, to the point where Christians can go broke supporting non-Christians. Poor people become Christian in name so that they can get support from better-off Christians. People do not always change after they have been accepted and forgiven. Prostitutes do not necessarily stop "the life" just because somebody forgave them. People that have been accepted do not necessarily extend the same kind of acceptance to other people. Gamblers do not always accept and forgive alcoholics. If too many people like this are part of the church, then the church will fall. To keep the church from falling, some members of the church have to turn all members into almost Agent Smith. This was a real problem in the early Christian church.

I do not know any sure way out of this problem that preserves both diversity and group identity, either in democracies or in Christianity. I do not know how to draw the line between Stepford Wife and Queen of the Damned. Lara Croft might be the modern idea of the unrealistic but attractive middle.

Faith Is Not Enough.

As a young child, I participated in what was likely the greatest social psychology experiment ever. A Disney TV program showed the adventures of Peter Pan and Tinkerbell the fairy. One day, Tinkerbell was mortally wounded, I think poisoned. The physical poison represented the spiritual poison that some

children did not believe in fairies, even in Tinkerbell. She would die unless all the children watching the program believed in her and believed she would recover. Only overwhelming faith could bring her back. I think we had to demonstrate our faith by clapping our hands at the right moment. Tinkerbell would hear, know that the children believed in her, and know that they loved her. The faith and love of the children would save her. It must be true because she recovered.

In "The Empire Strikes Back", Luke is trying to levitate his star ship from a swamp as Yoda looks on. Luke almost succeeds but not quite. Luke obviously has the ability but lacks something to complete the ability. Yoda tells Luke that he failed because Luke did not believe. There is no trying; there is only absolute black-and-white faith with doing. Either you believe and you succeed, or you do not believe and you fail. Absolute faith is able to overcome any physical barrier.

In the New Testament, Jesus is able to heal people because they believe. If they do not believe, he cannot heal them. Peter started out walking on water but sank when his faith in Jesus wavered. Jesus says that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains.

If only the power of faith were true. Mohammad had a good idea. He said, "If the mountain will not come to Mohammad, then Mohammad will go to the mountain".

Faith can be a powerful component in success. It can push us over the threshold we need to succeed, as when we give a talk in front of people, we fight a disease, or try to make it as a rock band. Self-confidence is good. That is why people want to be able to will to will, to will to believe.

But we cannot will to believe, and faith alone is not enough, and faith might not even be the most important thing. Several times I had serious infections. Faith alone could not have healed me. I needed some powerful exotic antibiotics.

Saying that faith alone is not enough does not kill Tinkerbell, deny the Force, condemn Luke never to finish his Jedi training, leave lepers and sick children to die, sink Peter in the water, or defy God. Not having your prayers answered does not mean that you did not believe strongly enough and that you should believe more.

Trying to believe more is making the same mistake as in Pascal' Wager above. We cannot will to will. We cannot believe more because we try to believe more. We believe as much as we believe because we think it is true.

Insisting that God do something for us because we believe is not a good show of faith but is a way of coercing God and defying God.

Someday the Israelis will burn animals in the Temple again as an offering to God. Many Jews hope the act restores the kingdom of Israel while many fundamentalist Christians hope the act brings the end of the world and the Second Coming. Neither will happen. Even if their faith were genuine, it cannot coerce God.

I have faith, and often it is childish and foolish. It is better to wait till later in the book to discuss the specifics. It does not include mystic energy or forcing God, and it does include relying on science.

Not Everything from Nothing.

The point of this section is that we can derive just about any silliness at all from nonsense, yet many religious fundamentals seem like nonsense, so we have to be careful. If the next two paragraphs annoy you, skip them.

Logicians have developed a formula to make sure their systems come out right. An "if-then statement" is like this: "If I let go of the ball, then it will fall". We can tell if the whole if-then statement is true or false by looking at the component parts to see if they are true or false. If "I let go of the ball" is true and "it falls" is true, then the whole if-then statement is true. If "I let go of the ball" is true but "it falls" is false, then the whole if-then statement is false. Maybe the ball is really a helium balloon. Usually assessing by parts makes sense even to people that are not logicians except when the "if" part of the if-then statement is stubbornly false. Suppose the "if" statement is "If the sky is green" so that we have "If the sky is green, then the ball will fall". The sky is not green and we are not sure about the falling ball. So then what do we know about the whole statement "If the sky is green, then the ball will fall"? Logicians decided that, in cases where the "if" is false, then the whole if-then statement is true regardless of the "then" statement. "If the sky is green, then the ball will fall" is true as a whole even though "the sky is green" is false. So the following if-then statement is true as a whole too just because the "if" statement is false: "If the sky is green, then the moon is made of cheese". This result goes against common sense and logicians know it does, but this technique has the value of showing us how whole systems work and of directing our attention to problems and holes. I do not show how.

It is better to see this peculiarity where the "if" statement is undeniably false. Some if-then statements have a pair of statements together as their "if": if ([I drop the ball], and [gravity still works]) can count as one "if" statement. We can use these double "if" statements in a larger "if-then" statements, such as the "if-then" statement above {if ([I drop the ball] and [gravity still works]), then the ball will fall}. We can make sense of this because we can decide if the two-inside-statements-in-one are together true or false. But suppose the pair of statements that together make up the "if" statement are contradictory and so undeniably false: if ([the sky is blue] and [the sky is not blue])? Then what do we make of the whole if-then statement for which the two contradictory statements together make up the "if": {if ([the sky is blue] and [the sky is not blue]), then the ball will fall}. What do we make of this? Logicians say this whole if-then statement is true anyway: {if ([the sky is blue] and [the sky is not blue]), then the ball will fly}. This is just strange, and seems like justifying nonsense.

Now resume the section. The equivalent to this kind of weirdness in everyday life is an if-then statement based on an "if" that cannot be evaluated: "If Jesus is God, then everybody that does not believe goes to hell". We cannot evaluate for sure whether or not Jesus is God, but we have to do something about the whole if-then idea anyway. It seems like the whole if-then statement is true even if Jesus is not God, so it seems like we have to accept the "then" part. It seems that we are going to hell if we are not careful, whether or not Jesus is God. We get confused and make mistakes.

With this logic, we can derive all we want from ideas that cannot be evaluated but have to be taken or rejected on faith. Starting from nonsense, we can say whatever we want, nobody can contradict us, and it seems like our conclusions must be true. In that case, we had better be careful what we say and what we accept.

This is why scientists are so keen to make sure that statements can be evaluated true or false. They need to know what conclusions we can draw from the statements and if we are liable to get confused. Since we cannot evaluate "If Jesus is God" then we have to be really careful about what conclusions we draw from it.

This is why we have to be careful about reading the Bible. It is self-contradictory and it says things that cannot be evaluated through experience or common sense such as that the earth stood still do help Joshua win a battle. From its self-contradictions and its statements that cannot be evaluated we can derive just about anything we want. This is why we have to be careful about faith and about thinking that faith alone is enough. Faith cannot be evaluated and so we can derive from it anything we want. We can make some pretty big mistakes by starting out "if you only believed enough". We find it hard to correct those mistakes.

Some religious have as their basic ideas statements that we cannot evaluate or that really are just nonsense, such as "Jesus is God", "the Dharma is everything", "you and God are one", or even, alas, "cultivate a relation with God", and "Spot the dog is both only a machine and more than a machine". The statements might or might not be true, and they might or might not mean something, but we have to be careful even if we do think they are true and meaningful.

To avoid the possibility of getting anything from nonsense, some groups fall back on very specific statements as a part of what you have to believe to "get it" and be part of the group, such as "You must be baptized to be saved, and you may have only one baptism for the remission of sins". In their own way, scientists do this, such as my belief that we have to explain in terms of parts rather than wholes. Yet People feel constrained by specifics. Even at risk of lapsing into nonsense from which we can derive anything, people want noble generalities that cover a lot of cases and that unify their worlds, such as "Do the right thing" and "God loves you".

People want specifics, feel constrained by them and so want generalities, but can be tricked by generalities. In the end, we have to balance generalities which might be nonsense and from which we can derive anything versus specifics that cannot do justice to the world and our beliefs.

No Magic Formula.

Now I give you some meaningful nonsense from which you can derive more nonsense if you wish, or from which you might get some insight.

There is no magic formula for exactly what to do as a result of religion, for what to believe, what God is, or how to have a right relation with God. There are always some guidelines. Guidelines are necessary. They are sufficient for most cases but not for all. We need something more sometimes and we need to be able to change the guidelines sometimes. The something more is trust. We have to let go of absolute

security, let go of fear, and then trust. If I try to specify exactly what this is, then I try to provide a magic formula, and I negate myself.

Trust does not mean that the world will turn out all right, that we only have to play our part, and God will do the rest. For all I know, we can go along with God, do what we should, and the world will still go to hell. For all I know, we can be right with God and our spouse can still die of cancer. Trust is not trusting in the world alone or trusting in God to magically save the physical world. Trust is trust. Trust is “fear not”. Trust is believing that we can be all right with God regardless of what happens in the world. Trust also extends to human beings but that is trickier, and I prefer to let that go until towards the end of the book.

This idea of trust is similar to ideas of trust found in various religions, and I do not know how to draw a clear line between this version and other versions, or even if there are no real differences. This idea is like the idea of trust in the Star Wars movies, as in “Luke, trust your feelings”. When we have no magic formula, then we cannot trust in any obvious logic, and so it seems as if we have to trust our feelings. Yet I do not want to say, “trust your emotions” because emotions betray us too. Both the Jedi and the Sith trust their feelings but one turns out good while the other turns out evil. Trust is not logic but it is not only emotions either. Star Wars understood the problem, and the basic idea of trust, but offered only a pop culture solution.

For a better solution, first we have to accept that we need the guidelines even if we cannot absolutely rely on them. Great religious adepts continue to act morally even if they put morality into a greater context. Jedi remain good. After we see that we need guidelines yet we need more too, then we can move into trust. This idea of trust is like what is found in some forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism but the similarities and differences are too much to go into here.

I do not know if trust is the same as love, and I do not speculate more here.

It is possible to say that trust is the same as faith or grace, but I do not want to use that formula because I think Protestants have misused the ideas of faith and grace and Roman Catholics have misused the idea of grace. Protestants think that: we have faith; faith leads to God bestowing grace; grace makes us righteous, and righteousness leads to salvation. Instead, I think we should not even think about righteousness and salvation. Faith and grace become means to the ends of righteousness and salvation rather than something in themselves. We need to think about a direct relation with God rather than about what God is good for and about the means to get it. The differences will become more apparent later in the book after we learn more about the Protestant ideas of faith, grace, and righteousness, and learn more about what I have in mind with the term “trust”.

Maybe it helps to say what this idea of trust is not. We cannot think that we trust God and are all right with God if we are merely righteous, if we achieve righteousness through faith, if we achieve righteousness through grace, if we are perfect in following the Law of the Bible, if we understand the correct dogma of the Church, if we follow the sacraments of the Church, if we follow the correct festivals, if we seek holiness for ourselves, if we seek holiness through separation from sinners, if we seek holiness in the middle of living in the corrupt world (the “floating world”), if we seek holiness for our nation or our ethnic group, or if we follow specific commandments.

Maybe it helps to look at what trust is liable to do to people that have trust, and what they are liable to do as a result of having trust. People that trust follow Jesus' teachings. They do unto others as they would have others do unto them. They are useful. They actively try to build a better world. They are merciful and forgiving.

I can see how someone could think, "The idea of trust has no content. I can make it mean whatever I want. From it, I can derive almost any conclusion, and can derive almost any justification for what I want to do for other reasons. The idea of trust is a potential goldmine of rationalization." The idea of trust can be abused like this. Ideas that are potentially empty at the core can be both powerfully good and open to powerful abuse. The ideas of Dharma and Tao are like this. I cannot offer sure safeguards against abuse for the same reason that I cannot offer a magic defining formula. We have to trust that trust will not lead to abuse most of the time. We have to trust that our judgment can get us out of abuse when it happens, most of the time. Unlike "willing to will", we can trust in trust.

Salvation.

Being saved is getting the ideas of Jesus and doing what he wanted to the extent that we are able. I am not sure what it could be otherwise in Christianity. Whether or not salvation leads to heaven is irrelevant. Jesus asked us to follow him because it was the right thing to do and not so that we could go to heaven.

Pure Morality.

Somewhere in the Bible it says that we should do good to our enemies so as to heap coals on their heads. This idea is perverse. It mocks the sense of good. We do not do good for any personal end, such as riches or security. Especially we do not do good so as to indirectly do bad, to our enemies or to anybody else. Jesus said to do good to our enemies so as to do good to our enemies, not so as to hurt them or so as to help ourselves. Morality is something in itself. Legions of philosophers have written reams to make this point, and I cannot make this point any clearer by saying it at greater length.

Of course, real people mix morality with practicality. We have to, or we could not get along, prosper, and raise families. I cannot condemn the mixing of practicality and morality out of hand. I cannot ask for perfect people who might doom themselves out of their own perfection. I also cannot excuse immorality. Later parts of the book talk about relations of morality and practicality.

A standard scenario in soap operas is second-guessing somebody who appears to go a good thing but might really be doing it for selfish motives. Lady X gives a million dollars to charity but really does it as a tax dodge. People can even fool themselves into thinking they act out of good motives by forgetting their own self-interest. Lady X might overlook the tax dodge in her own mind. We can spend a lot of time wondering whether the poor widow Y donated her only pair of Gucci shoes to Goodwill because she wanted somebody to benefit from them before she died or because they aggravated her bunions and she wanted a tax write-off. At some point, it is better to stop wondering about the motives of others and of our selves, and to just take good at face value.

Related errors are the ideas that something has to be hard to be really moral (“no pain, no gain”), if an action is not hard then it is not moral, and that if an action is hard then that action is really moral. “It cannot be really moral to give to the poor if it is not hard. The more it hurts to give, the more moral and virtuous. Because it is hard not to have an abortion but instead bear the child and raise it, then it must be moral not to have an abortion or to raise a child in poverty. Because it is hard to die for your country, it must be right. Because it is hard to go against the big capitalist corporations and the conspiracy between big business and the government, it must be morally correct. You have to do more than the easy thing.” Morality often is harder than alternatives but hardness does not make right any more than might makes right. Right makes right.

Faith and Works.

(1) Suppose a person gets Jesus’ teachings but is poor, sick, and can do little about building a better world. That person has faith but no works. (2) Suppose a person is not sure about the divine source of Jesus’ ideas but does good things all the time, and is pretty selfless by any normal standards. That person does good works but does not have standard faith. (3) Suppose someone knows of Jesus and his ideas but thinks that believing that Jesus-is-God-and-died-for-our-sins is enough to go to heaven, and does not do very much else to build a better world. That person has faith but no works also. (4) Suppose someone gets Jesus’ teachings but does good not to help people or to build a better world but to get to heaven. That person has good works but does not rely on faith.

Which of these people is right or wrong? The best answer is: “That is not my business. That is between God and these individual people.” I personally think the first two people are in much better shape than the last two.

I doubt you can earn your way into heaven, or earn your way into a good relation with God without also having good intent. I doubt you can have a good relation with God if you believe in God but do nothing about it. It makes no sense to say that good works are enough or that faith is enough.

If we cannot absolutely look into the hearts of people then we cannot pronounce on the correct mix of faith and good works. To echo passages whose citation I cannot recall: Faith without works is sterile and works without faith can be cancerous. Encourage a mix of the two.

God Does Not Test Us.

I do not even argue about whether or not God knows us well enough so that he has to test us. Even if God did not know us well enough, to test us by shoving us into hardship would be cruel and unworthy. We are not hunting dogs so that God needs to see if we can stand the early morning damp and cold. Life is hard enough. It provides enough obstacles. God can find out enough about us from watching us slog through life.

Thinking that God tests us is a way to explain the evil in life without accepting that it is really evil and without blaming God. If badness is a test, and we get through it by faith, then God is even better than we thought. But there is evil, and God allowed it, and God allowed it to happen to you or to a loved one even though you did not deserve it, and it is not a test. I do not know why.

Not Conducive to Being Useful.

Buddhists classify ideas in categories besides the usual true and false. Some ideas might be true or false, and might be important if we could decide true or false, but we have a hard time evaluating them. Heaven is one of these. It might be important to know about heaven one way or another but we really cannot say one way or another. The mix of faith and works is another. We can waste a lot of time and energy on these ideas that might be better spent elsewhere, such as in being useful. When we run into one of these ideas, we should stop thinking about it and get on to better ideas. Buddhists call these ideas “not conducive to enlightenment”. Following C.S. Lewis, I say “not conducive to being useful”.

Free Will and Determinism.

The problem of free will and determinism, together with all the problems that go along with it, are not conducive to being useful. The problem is interesting, and, if you have spare time on your hands and you like this sort of thing, or if your job requires you to think about this sort of things, then go ahead. But being useful does not depend on solving the problem of free will.

Being useful does not require solving the problem of predestination to salvation or to damnation, especially since I do not think there is salvation or damnation in the fundamentalist sense anyway. We are not absolutely free. We are free enough to recognize the teachings of Jesus and to follow them as best we can if we wish. That is as much freedom as most of us need.

Saved and Damned.

This is another issue that is not conducive to being useful. We cannot know for sure in this world if we are saved or damned. We can know whether or not we get the ideas of Jesus and whether or not we intend to follow them as best we can. Worrying about whether we are saved or damned only gets in the way of carrying out the ideas of Jesus. Looking for signs of whether we are saved or damned especially gets in the way of following Jesus. Judging other people on the basis of signs about salvation and damnation that we make up directly thwarts following the ideas of Jesus. Taking worldly success as a sign of being saved, and then treating people better if they are rich or powerful or famous or beautiful or athletic, directly gets in the way of following the teachings of Jesus. Ironically, looking for signs of salvation is likely to damn us. Get over it and be useful instead.

Not Merely in the Presence of the Lord.

In his book, “Till We Have Faces”, C.S. Lewis tells about a group of people that have serious questions for God about justice, duty, why we should strive in life against so much hardship, and about our how we have hurt other people. The questions come right out of their hard life experiences and their roles as public servants. They think they will see God someday because the sister of one of them has gone to live with God, and she promised to come back. When she and God do come back, the people do not bother to ask God the questions that once seemed so urgent. The mere presence of God is answer enough. Many real people outside of books have this experience, both in and out of Christianity. Many real people feel the presence of the Lord, and it can be satisfying and fulfilling. Many people who have had a near-

death experience say that they stop worrying about the little things and go on to focus on enjoying life and on doing what is important in life. The doctrinal expression of the idea that the mere presence of the Lord is enough might be "saved by faith alone". Orthodox Christians hope to induce a similar experience at Easter when they greet the risen Lord and act as if he is among them. Some people feel this way at a Lord's Supper. Some people feel this way at a great natural sight such as the Grand Canyon. Some people feel this way when the trees sway, and I do not want to doubt the truth of their feeling.

The trouble is, what next? Now that the people have seen God and had all their questions set aside by awe, what do they do? I would not have to ask this question if all people that had this experience were transformed in the same way, and all immediately understood Jesus' teaching and acted to build the same better world, or all acted in accord with the Mosaic Law, or all acted in accord with all the teachings of Mohammad, or in accord with the Dharma. But they do not. They act according to different religions, not all of which are compatible. They act in different ways even when they share the same religious background, such as when they are all Methodists. They forget. Even when they remember, they still seem able to act immorally such as by defrauding the poor. A lot of good Christians who have felt the presence of the Lord do bad things.

The presence of the Lord alone is not enough. Devotion alone is not enough. We need more. We need ideas that can guide our actions in accord with experience and morals. We need to do what some people with near-death experiences do: forget about little things, appreciate life, and get to work on what is important.

In the high days of Hippies, people thought using drugs would be enough, usually strong drugs such as LSD, but even softer drugs such as marijuana. They were wrong. You have to have something to follow the experience.

Some people do not even need the experience. They can understand the ideas and act on them without the extra urging. I think they are as lucky as the people that do have the experience.

I am not saying that I would not be swayed by such an experience. Listen to the Blind Faith song "Presence of the Lord". I have come close enough to this experience to know that it could change my life and that I would act in accord with whatever I believed gave the experience. If the God of Presbyterians thrilled me, I would be highly inclined to convert and to act like a good Presbyterian. But what if I was not sure of the source? Or what if I was a good Roman Catholic and I thought the experience came from the Hindu Shiva? Or if I was a good Hindu and I thought the experience came from the Muslim Yahweh? A lot of people who have this experience but did not previously believe in any particular god, and do not associate the experience with any particular god, say that the experience changed their lives by making them appreciate life more, appreciate nature more, and be kinder and more peaceful. The experience might be powerful, but we still have to evaluate it according to our best understanding of life, morality, and religion. Devotion alone is not enough.

God Does Not Harden Hearts or Abuse Innocents.

When the Hebrews were trying to get out of Egypt, God, through Moses, threatened Egypt with plagues if Pharaoh did not let God's people go. Pharaoh did not, so Egypt had to endure locusts, rivers of blood,

and even the death of its firstborn male children. It is natural to ask why Pharaoh did not let the Hebrews go given the penalties the Egyptian people had to endure. The Bible says God “hardened the hearts” of the Egyptians (or at least Pharaoh) so they would resist God so that God could show how powerful he was, how much he controlled any nation, and how much he favored the Hebrews.

This story is not obnoxious because God favored the Hebrews – that is their good luck and not our bad luck.

This story is obnoxious on two other counts. First, God should not use innocent people, the Egyptians, to make a point about how powerful he is. If he did, he would be the devil, not God. Second, God should not harden the heart of an individual person because to do so would take away that person’s free will and take away the rationale for a lot of other teaching in the Bible such as the importance of intent. I do not even know what it means to harden the hearts of a whole people apart from hardening the hearts of their leaders or hardening the hearts of each person individually. This is another instance of self-contradiction in the Bible if we take the story literally. To “harden hearts” is nonsense from which we can derive whatever we want. As with the story of Isaac, it is possible to rationalize this story to make it less obnoxious but I think it is better to face the implications, overcome what is wrong, and seek something better.

God Does Not Soften Hearts: Grace.

The flip side of not hardening hearts is harder to see and not as directly obnoxious. In fact, it is appealing: God bestows grace on some people by leading them to believe and by saving them. God softens their hearts. Yet God does not soften hearts either. If God softened the heart of anybody so as to make that person believe in him, then God would take away the free will of that person. God would take away the soul of that person. God would take away the very thing that God wanted to save. He would “destroy the village in order to save it”. By softening one heart but not another, God would act to favor one person but not to favor other people. God would put the other people at a disadvantage. God would condemn some people by not giving them the help that he gave to a few special people.

The doctrinal slogan for saving a person by softening that person’s heart and then saving is “salvation through grace”.

I do think that God helps people. I think he helps some people more than others. I think that his help can be crucial. God sometimes helps people that do not even know of him or believe in him while he does not help sincere believers that ask for his help on important issues, and that might even need his help. I do not know why.

I do not think that God’s help is needed in every case where people get the teachings of Jesus, see the beauty of the world, see morality, or see the need to have a relation with God.

I doubt we can fully understand this situation. We face potentially contradictory statements, where we can derive whatever we want from nonsense, and we can get confused. We can ask for help and grace but we have to be careful to think about the implications of whatever doctrine we might use to explain

grace. We should not invoke grace to explain events, such as conversion, just because it is convenient.

Minimal Magic. Magic works because we want it to work, mechanically without our having to understand why. We use it to coerce the world into doing what we want. All we need to know is that we have a formula, and it works. Magic is not the same as “magical”, imagination, a sense of wonder, or a sense of delight in the world. In fact, magic can be the enemy of those feelings. Whether magic is White or Black depends on the nature of the process and on the intent of the magician. Any process that requires the sacrifice of an innocent animal or child, or the truth, is Black regardless of the goal.

Social scientists used to distinguish between magic and religion by saying that magic was a private thing, done in private, by an individual or small group, for private gain. In contrast, religion was a social thing, done in a public group, for group welfare that might or might not benefit any particular person in the group. This distinction is good to keep in mind but does not hold up when pushed. A lot of groups perform public acts for the group but that are still best understood as magic. Most Christians classify a Black Mass as magic even though it is similar to an ordinary Mass.

Some everyday activities are like magic but we do not think of them that way because they are so familiar and because we think there is a mundane explanation behind them. When I press F8 on my computer keyboard, things happen automatically, for my benefit, in private, and I do not know how; but that is not magic. As every science fiction reader knows, the modern world would seem like magic to somebody from even only a couple hundred years ago. Read “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court” by Mark Twain.

On the other hand, a lot of religion is magic, even if the participants do not see it as magic and even if the original intent might not have been magic, especially rituals such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper (Eucharist). Also counting as magic are acts or ideas we invoke even if the original conception was not magic, such as blind faith, the presence of the Lord, the idea that God will help us often, or that God will make us rich.

Magic often gets in the way of true religion, such as following the ideals of Jesus. One goal of this book is to present Christianity with as little magic as possible.

Near the end of the book “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe”, the White Witch thinks she has defeated Aslan the Lion (Jesus) because she invoked a magical formula to the effect that a good character (Aslan) may be required to substitute for a bad character that committed treason (Edmund, who liked Turkish Delight too much). Later when Aslan is resurrected, he reminds the Ice Queen that there is an even deeper magical formula: whenever a good person willingly undergoes such a sacrifice, he-she will return even greater than before. This is charming and we hope it is true. But, if it is true, it is not magic. Too often, it is not true. When it is true, it almost never involves literal return from the dead as C.S. Lewis wrote about but instead involves keeping the spirit of a martyr alive in the hearts of followers, as with Wallace in “Brave Heart”. It is true not because of magic but because of human nature and human imagination. Perhaps God planned human nature and human imagination to work that way. If that is magic, then it is not natural magic and not magic of the kind to found Christianity on. Focusing on the magic of the resurrection and salvation through the resurrection can actually impede following Jesus.

The Vehicle and the Message.

True or not, bad or good, people need magic. Magic can be a lot of fun if we are careful. Good religious teachers sometimes use magic as a vehicle to convey deeper ideas. The stories about the voyages of Sinbad have magic but they have important messages too about friendship and honesty. Parables are message in a magic wrapper. Sometimes people can only understand or accept a message if it is in a magic wrapper, as with the plagues that God sent against Egypt. The problem is that people too often focus on the magic wrapper while forgetting the more important pearl of wisdom inside.

I believe this is what happened with Jesus' death and resurrection. They are the magic wrappers. They should get people to think about Jesus' teachings but instead people get stuck in the glitter of the wrappers. By thinking that Jesus died to save our sins and thus we are saved without having to do much else, or that Jesus' resurrection means that we too will be resurrected and go to heaven if we only believe, we get distracted by the wrappers and forget the important message within. What does it mean to be forgiven and saved if we do not contribute to Jesus' mission? What good would it do to be resurrected to a world where Jesus' teachings do not matter? This is a kind of pyramid scheme (see below). To focus on the wrapper while forgetting about the pearl inside is actually a type of idolatry.

Christianity is not the only religion where people get distracted by the wrapper while forgetting the pearl inside. Christianity is not the only religion in which magic hijacks religion. Other religions might do a better job of warning their followers of this danger and of providing good means of escape.

Not About Justification.

People need to feel successful. Especially in Indo-European (Western and Indian) cultures, and Judeo-Christian-Islamic cultures, people also need to feel justified. They need to feel they are basically correct, not guilty, their lives matter, and are "right with God". People go to great lengths to feel justified. They join causes such as "save the whales" or "pro life". They stress single-issue politics such as energy independence or national "defense". They bomb abortion clinics. They blow themselves up along with a lot of innocent people.

Sometimes the need to feel justified can lead to social good, as it did when northerners agitated for the abolition of slavery in the United States. But the need to feel justified is misleading and can lead to great social damage. People hurt the poor because people go on moral crusades against welfare, gambling, abortion, or soft drugs so as to make themselves feel good without thinking about the freedom of other people and without thinking that the results might hit the poor hardest. Seeking justification is an abuse of religion. Jesus did not wish us to be active so we could feel justified about ourselves. He wished us to be active so as to build the Kingdom of God, build a better world. The teachings of Jesus are not about justification. When seeking to feel justified gets in the way of getting the teachings of Jesus or building a better world, then seeking justification is wrong even if the cause it serves might be right otherwise. People need to get over the idea that they can feel justified because they work hard in a cause that might be right

We need to really think about whether we are acting primarily to do good or to make ourselves feel better by making ourselves feel justified. We need to think about how we can be useful overall, and to pick where we can best help rather than where we might better chase justification. We need to think about what all needs to be done, and how we can best use our energy and abilities.

Religion and Morality as Weapons.

Religion and morality are not fully objective. Thus we cannot always agree about right and wrong. People argue and disagree. People give opinions, want to convince others, and want their opinions to prevail as the group norm. When people can do this, then people use their opinions to get other people to do what they want other people to do. People use morality and religion to get other people to do what they want the other people to do. People use morality this way not because they really are right but because they can control people. People use morality this way even when they know deep in their hearts they are wrong. Sometimes people do this for power and sometimes they do it so they can feel good by feeling justified. People say it is wrong to have a beer after work not because they have thought it out but because they want to control the mood and behavior of others. People want other people to feel as if they are always being watched and under control. People say it is wrong to have sex except for procreation, and in any other way except missionary position, so they can “get into the heads” of other people and control the reproductive lives of other people.

I especially dislike when people use morality to control the poor. Ideas about sex, abortion, drugs, alcohol, gambling, and demeanor are important for a decent society but they are also ways to control the poor by “getting into their heads”, by setting up rules that make it hard for the poor to enjoy what little they have, and by setting up rules that make it easy for the police to harass the poor.

We have to think really hard about why we think something is right or wrong, and, if we think it is wrong, how much we need other people to conform to our standards of right and wrong. Especially we have to think really hard about whether or not we want to use the state (government) to enforce our ideas of right and wrong.

No Simple Duality.

“Dualism” is seeing a situation in terms of two contrasting and usually opposite ideas: “good and bad”, “Red Sox and Yankees”, “East coast working class versus West coast smooth”, “classical versus pop”, “West coast jazz versus East coast jazz”, “realism versus naturalism”, “abstract versus representational”, “freedom versus oppression”, “rich versus poor”, “workers versus owners”, “country versus city” “Republicans versus freedom”, “Yankees versus Southerners”, “conservative versus liberal”, and “straights versus gays”.

“Manichean dualism” is seeing most of the world, including especially religion, deities, and morality, in terms of opposition between the forces of good versus the forces of evil. Usually the forces are personified into a good God versus a bad devil. Western Christianity, especially Protestantism, tends toward Manichean dualism. Republicans since Reagan live in Manichean dualism, of which the Bush-Cheney administration was a sad example. Western arts use Manichean dualism as a framework and as a plot so much that giving examples would be wasteful.

It is easy to make fun of dualism, and I will, but dualism can be useful. It can be hard to see the forest for the trees. In some situations, we need to simplify so that we can see enough to understand, and so that we can do something. Dualism can help, as with the sports dualisms and pop culture dualisms above. It helps to follow the NFL if you like some teams better than others, and if you see some teams as heroes and other teams as villains. American arts of at least the last 100 years would have been fairly boring without dualism such as in most space movies, westerns, and spy movies. We just have to remember that there are always important boundary cases and exceptions, we might have to let go of our dualism if it does not work or if another works better, and human judgment is more important than any dualism.

I tend to see Christianity in terms of morality versus blind faith, with the good God lined up on my side and the deluding devil behind the blind believers. Their blind faith allows people to do bad things that they would not do if instead they focused on morality, and allows people not do the good that they should be doing. I am sure I am right, but I also know that it can be carried too far. My way tends to elitism and moralistic causes.

We can never have only one dualism at a time, even in the same situation. Even if we believe in simple good versus simple evil, are the poor always on the side of good or always on the side of evil? We usually have lists of dualisms that we take into a situation. We then spend a lot of time and effort juggling and re-shuffling our various dualisms to make them line up. Sports discussion programs (sports news) often are just a parade of dualisms with each speaker in turn offering his-her take on the list and the priorities. Panels at academic conferences often are little different. Sometimes when we juggle we try to minimize the contradictions so as to find the heart of the matter but mostly we try to make the various dualisms line up so as to make us seem right.

Expansion Because.

It is easiest to explain this mistake if I describe how I came to see it. In the 1960s and 1970s, Americans faced not only evangelizing Christians but also evangelizing Buddhists, Hindus, and Taoists. I recall facing a Buddhist in a strange sect. What would happen if I joined? I would feel good, and I would see the world as it really is. I would go out and get other people to join. Then what? We would go out and get even more people to join. Why? Because people in the movement are happy and have good lives and go to Buddhist heaven while people outside do not. What makes you have a happy good life? Seeing what the world is all about and getting other people to join. This is another version of Agent Smith.

For me, this does not work. There has to be a point to the movement, like saving the whales or ending government interference in the free market. If we think there is a magical experience that automatically makes people inside feel good and makes them want to go get other people into the movement, then really the movement is empty even if it goes on for a long time.

Movements that feed on themselves do not need any content. In fact, the less content the better. If that sect of Buddhism had promised me I would be able to levitate, and then I could not, then I would have

quit. By promising me nothing except a vague “wow” experience and the call to call others, the movement had nothing deniable, and could go on forever. A great pyramid scheme.

Even a modest private “wow” experience works almost as well as nothing at all, for example the social whoosh at a party or the warm feeling of yoga. A modest private experience helps to get a person in. By promising me a feeling of tranquility and the ability to see the world “as it really is”, the Buddhist sect was more likely to get me into the movement and keep me long enough.

Once in, successful movements have methods to keep people in.

This is the way that pyramid schemes and chain letters work. “If you send this email on to ten other people, you will be sure to get your secret wish”.

In fairness to Buddhism, most Buddhism is not like that, and most Buddhism has a definite concrete agenda after the “wow”, an agenda aimed at ending suffering.

Unfortunately, a lot of Christianity is like that. You have a “wow” experience in the presence of the Lord, in the presence of other believers, or at a ceremony in church. You think that you are forgiven and saved just because Jesus died. You think Jesus was resurrected, and that his resurrection has some cosmic importance, and so you will be resurrected and live forever in heaven too. You go out to get converts so that you can continue your “wow” experience and share it. The “wow” can be as explosive as sensing cosmic love, seeing angels, and then fainting or it can be as subtle as a sense that finally you now belong in the right group. That’s it. “Come with us and be saved.” What happens after I get saved? “You go out and save more people, who go to save more people, and so on.” The church grows on itself, like the housing bubble of the early 2000s or like a chain email. Most bubbles burst but some can go on for a long time, such as some forms of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Taoism.

Lots of religious groups have the “wow” experience. The “wow” should not be too important. Whether or not the “wow” is true as far as it goes does not matter so much as what happens after the “wow” experience. If growth of the group is based on what you do afterwards, such as feed the poor, then it makes sense. If growth of the group is based primarily on recruiting then it does not make sense. “Try it you’ll like it, and then you can be a part of us too” works for religions as much as it works for junkies, sects, gambling, or for a particular style of sex. For religion to be more than junk, it has to be more than “wow” and has to be more than “us ever expanding”.

“Building a better world” has enough independent substance to it so that we can strive toward that for a long time as the basis for a religion apart from any particular “wow” experience or on top of any “wow” experience. If ever we run out of the need to build a better world, and I hope we do, then we really can be happy, and we can look for another basis for religion.

For some people, the “wow” is enough. It is self-explaining and self-justifying, a “being in the presence of the Lord”. For people that have such an experience and for whom it is enough, it is natural to want to share. I do not want to deny the validity of this experience for some people, or their right to share it, or their joy in sharing it. I only warn other people to be cautious, not to feel bad if they cannot have the

same experience, and to go ahead doing your religion even without sharing in that experience or joining that group.

Groups of people that have had the “wow” experience fall into two large camps. The first kind does not depend on recruiting but only wishes to share the experience with other people that can appreciate it. The second kind depends on recruiting, especially by trying to induce the experience in other people. Enjoy the first kind of group but avoid the second.

If religion were limited only to people that have the “wow” experience, then it would not be religion as I understand it or as I understand God’s intent. Religion comes in many ways and gets expressed in many ways. I have seen people do good things who have not had the “wow” experience but who have only simple faith. Not everybody can have the same “wow” experience, people can have genuine religion without having that experience, and a full religion has to include more than that “wow” experience alone even if that “wow” experience seems to be enough for some people.

Religion, Morality, and Evidence.

In science, the relation between facts and theory is usually pretty clear, scientists can usually decide if a fact is true or not, and scientists can usually decide if a fact supports a theory or denies a theory. We can see whether or not an apple falls if we drop it, and we can decide if that fact supports Newton’s theory of gravity or not. The relation is not perfect, and scientists use judgment to improve the relation between fact and theory. The falling apple supports Einstein’s theory of gravity even better than Newton’s although that difference is not obvious.

The relation between fact, morality, and religion is more complicated. Ideally, we would like to be able to read right and wrong directly from facts. We go to court so that we can decide right and wrong from facts. But, as many thousands of lawyer shows on TV have demonstrated, facts do not speak for themselves, and we cannot always know if a fact supports a theory or denies it. Two men are sitting in a room, with guns on their laps. One man lifts up his gun and kills the other man. Is this murder or self-defense? We cannot decide by looking at the facts alone. Even with a film, we could not decide. We have to know the intent, history, mood, and even physical condition of the two men such as if they were high or not. Even then, we decide what is right or wrong; the facts still do not speak for themselves. The philosopher David Hume said that we cannot deduce “ought” from “is”. We impose our ideas of rightness and wrongness of physical situations that have no right and wrong in themselves. A lion kills and eats a gazelle. One lion kills another lion in a fight over mates. A male lion kills the cubs of a female lion so that she will go into heat so that he can be the father of all her children and so that his own children will have no rivals. A person kills and eats a puppy. A person kills his neighbor for driving around in a rolling boom box that shakes the dishes. A man kills a woman’s boyfriend so that he can have her all to himself. In one case she wanted him to do it and in another case she did not. Which of these cases is right or wrong, where do we draw the line, and why do we draw the line?

Yet facts are relevant. We do want to know the intent, history, mood, and condition of the two men with guns, and at least some of those items are facts. Suppose one man had substituted the bullets in his rival’s gun with blanks. That is a physical fact, and it bears on our judgment of right and wrong. When one man kills another for the woman who wanted him to, we want to know if her boyfriend abused her or

not, how badly he abused her, and why she couldn't go to the police. TV lawyer shows are not really about how hard it is to assess right and wrong from given facts but about how a previously-hidden-fact-but-now-suddenly-revealed-fact changes our assessment of what is right and wrong. We do not have to judge; the facts judge for us. Really, the shows let us off the hook.

With science, there is pretty good theory about the relation between facts and theory. With right and wrong, there is a relation between facts and theory but there is no good dominant theory about the relation between facts and theory. We have to assess as we go along. We just have to live with this situation until a great philosopher comes along. We will return to this issue later in the book.

This problem shows up in religion and morality because people cite facts to support or deny religion and morality. Sometimes the facts might bear on the case but too often they do not. Yet people continue to cite facts as if they did bear, and other people go along with it. I find this situation rather strange. It is one reason I studied the biology of people.

Before looking at Christianity, it is better to look at Buddhism. Buddhists use stories of the young Buddha to convey ideas. In one story, to show that Buddha is really special, and that we ought to venerate him, even if we do not pay attention to what he says, the Buddha walks and talks since he was born. If Buddha really did walk and talk since he was born, would that validate his teaching? If Buddha did not really walk and talk since he was born, would that invalidate his teaching? Some facts are relevant and some are not, no matter how spectacular. A major tenet of Buddhism is that life might be interesting sometimes but on the whole it is not really worth it. Life is to be endured until over. Endure life with grace if possible, but do not get too attached to life or you will suffer. If we could find one happy person who found life really worth living and was deeply attached to life, would that invalidate Buddha's teaching? This is not so clear. We have to argue further about whether the person is really happy, and what would happen if the situation changed. If the situation changed but the person was not able to sustain his-her happiness, was the person really happy to begin with? What if we could find a person that could sustain his-her happiness even through changes? If everybody in the world at one time were miserable, would that fact validate Buddhism? I leave the reader to ponder.

While I was writing this, I was reading theologians arguing about whether or not Jesus was really resurrected, so I will use that issue as an example, but the idea applies to other aspects of Jesus' life such as the virgin birth, the miracles, and the magical ability of the crucifixion to forgive sins and save. Suppose we can divide people into conservative Christians who believe in the resurrection, liberal Christians who deny the resurrection, and atheists. If Jesus was resurrected, does that necessarily mean that he was also the Son of God, God, Lord, Messiah, and co-creator of the universe? If Jesus was the Son of God, does that necessarily mean he was also resurrected, God, Lord, Messiah, and co-creator of the universe? And so on for each term? If Jesus was resurrected, does that validate conservative Christianity along with its entire social and political program, and invalidate liberal Christianity and atheism along with their entire social and political programs? If Jesus was not resurrected, does that validate liberal Christianity or atheism along with their entire social and political programs and invalidate conservative Christianity along with its entire social and political program? I can easily imagine a conservative Christianity that could survive the fact that Jesus was not resurrected just as I can easily imagine a liberal Christianity that could survive the fact that Jesus was resurrected. I can easily imagine the resurrection energizing liberal Christianity while invalidating the social and political program of

conservatives. I cannot imagine an atheism that could survive Jesus' resurrection, although I can imagine a social and political program held by atheists that could survive Jesus' resurrection. So we can see that facts are still relevant but we are not entirely sure how. If Jesus really was resurrected, does that mean we all have to give up alcohol? If Jesus was not resurrected, does that mean we all have to become homosexual and marry another homosexual? If Jesus really said we have to hate our parents to follow him, does that mean we really have to? We do not know what facts really support or deny Christianity in general, and support or deny conservative or liberal Christianity in particular with its particular social and political programs, or support or deny atheism with its social and political program. Yet liberal and conservative Christians pick particular facts to argue about as if those facts somehow totally validated their kind of Christianity and totally invalidated all the alternatives. They act like Perry Mason or Matlock. They act like the lawyer on a TV show after he-she has revealed the surprise fact that should clinch the case. They act as if all other kinds of Christianity and all other religions were the poor DA who is proven wrong, utterly defeated, and banished to loser hell.

It is hard to decide facts about the resurrection, the virgin birth, or the magical efficacy of the crucifixion. Perhaps this is just as well. Liberal Christians, conservative Christians, and atheists can continue to argue and to have a good time while avoiding other issues.

If there were a good theory as to which facts did support or deny what, then we would still have to decide what the facts are. That is what historians would be for. If we knew all the facts, we would still have to decide what they mean according to our good theory of relevance. That is what good minds are for. If we had the theory and the facts, and had made all the decisions, this book would not be needed. I cannot answer these questions. All I can do is show you enough of the arguments so that you do not get lost or confused.

Other Grounds, Other Arguments.

Perhaps arguments about the virgin birth, the miracles, the magical efficacy of the crucifixion, and the resurrection are not conducive to following the teachings of Jesus. In the end, if we decide that we cannot decide the facts about questions such as the resurrection, then we have to use other grounds to decide what to do. We have to decide the validity of the conservative, liberal, or atheist social and political programs on other grounds. We need arguments based on morality, human nature, and human social life. These arguments force us into questions about relations between the state, religion, morality, religious groups, social groups, political groups, and other interest groups. In those discussions, the teachings of Jesus will still be key even though we cannot decide the facts about the resurrection and other magical episodes of Jesus' life.

The State as Our Agent.

People find it natural to use the state to support their religion and morality. Liberals are more likely to blame conservatives but conservatives are correct that Political Correctness is as prone to using the state to enforce its morals as is any conservative theocratic agenda. This is wrong. It is right to use the state to uphold some moral positions, such as "do not kill". It is wrong to use the state to impose some moral positions that we want such as "do not commit abortion" even when we are sure that those moral positions are correct and even when we are sure that violating these moral rules hurts people.

Not so long ago, people used the state to make sure that everybody went to the right church and that everybody had sex the right way. Now we understand we should not use the state to do that, if for no other reason than that it can backfire on us. If we use the state now to make everybody go to a Protestant church, in the future someone can use the state to make everyone go to a Muslim mosque or Buddhist temple. If we use the state now to make sure everybody has sex in missionary position with the man on top, then some other group later can use the state to make sure everybody has homosexual sex regularly. The ambiguities in morality and religion, and the tendency of people to use morality and religion as weapons, make it all the easier and all the more tempting to use the state.

The early Christians disapproved of abortion. They did not try to make their idea of supporting life the law of the Roman Empire. They did not try to change the behavior of all non-Christians. Instead, they went along with the basic rules of the Empire, they did what they thought was right among themselves, and they tried to change the minds of people that were willing to listen. They kept their own stricter rules within their group and did not try to impose their own stricter rules on people in general. When Christianity became the official religion of the empire, and Christians tried to impose their morality, a lot of things began to go wrong, some of which still haunt us to this day, such as laws against divorce.

We have to find which general moral rules we need the state to enforce, such as against theft and murder. We need to find which rules we want to prevail in our group but which we do not necessarily want the state to enforce for us, such as rules against divorce. We have to let people who are not like us do as they wish even if what they do seems immoral and self-destructive to us, such as allow homosexual marriage or not allow anyone in their group to get a divorce. We have to not be obnoxious, such as by hurting the environment, being dirty, or causing loud noise.

It is not always easy to draw the line between what we need the state to enforce and what we want among ourselves but do not need the state to enforce. Abortion is one of these cases. People that want to use the state to stop abortion genuinely believe they are protecting innocent children. People that want to use the state to preserve the right to an abortion genuinely think they are preserving free choice and defending the need for a woman to plan her family life for the greater good of a greater family. I do not argue any more about it here.

Sometimes another group uses the state to impose its morality, thus violating the rule above. Sometimes that other morality hurts us. Sometimes the other group intends to hurt us and sometimes they do not care. Sometimes another group uses the state to support behavior that we think is detrimental to society in general or to us in particular even when the laws are not aimed at us, such as when conservative Christians think that liberals use the state to impose the acceptance of homosexual marriage. Liberal Christians see using state lands for Christmas displays in the same way. If we really feel threatened, then we might have to defend ourselves, and we might have to use the state to defend ourselves. We might have to use the state to impose our ideas of morality so as to defend ourselves against a group that wants its ideas to prevail.

Fortunately, I do not think this situation arises nearly as often as people fear. Unfortunately, I think people invoke this situation to generate fear to get what they want. I think people use fear to create artificial battlegrounds to get their own way. This is part of using religion and morality as weapons. I think

most argument over abortion is more about getting your own way than about protecting innocent babies or preserving freedom of choice. I doubt that allowing homosexual marriage or allowing Christmas scenes on the courthouse lawn will cause the heavens to fall or will corrupt all children. So we have to be really cautious before deciding somebody else is using the state to hurt us, and we have to think hard about how to respond. It is better not to impose our own morality if we can help it, and especially better not to use the state.

Morality, Religion, and Human Nature.

The argument in this section has four parts.

First, morality and religion have strong roots in human nature. We cannot ask people to tell the truth, and not to lie, if people do not have a good intuitive idea of what is real and what is not, and what it means to conform to reality. We cannot ask people not to steal if they do not have a good intuitive idea of “mine” and “yours”. We cannot say, “God is like a person” and “God loves us like children” if we do not already have good intuitive ideas of what a person is and of love between parents and children. We need to look for the roots of religion and morality in human nature.

Second, even though morality and religion have deep roots in human nature, they transcend human nature sometimes. “Do not lie” means, “Do not lie”; it does not mean, “Do not lie except when you feel like it or when you can gain”. It is an ideal. It is not how people act all the time or how we expect them to act all the time. The same is true of stealing, murdering, adultery, and most of the common human moral ideals. Moral logic is not the same as practical logic. Likewise, to believe in God is to believe in something we cannot sense. To love other people is a clear part of human nature but to love our neighbor as ourselves is clearly beyond what could be expected in nature. How anything beyond our nature can arise from our nature yet and be sustained within our nature, and what that might mean for Jesus’ teachings, are questions for later parts of the book.

Third, even though morality and religion transcend our nature somewhat, they cannot go too far. Everybody “borrows” paper clips, and we have to learn to live with that. To live with that is easier than to massively police every desk in the world. Nobody really can love his neighbor as him-herself. Or, at least, nobody can do that and have a normal human life such as a family. Even if we want to love our neighbor as ourselves, we cannot love our neighbor’s children as much as we love our own children. We cannot run society based only on religious and moral ideals, even if we appeal to ideals from time to time. We have to take into account both real human nature and occasional leaps above human nature. We can use the ideals of religion and morality to guide how we make the real institutions that guide real human nature. We cannot expect to transform real human nature to conform to our religious or moral ideals or to our ideals of human society. Moral logic, and religion, originated (evolved) out of practical strategy even if they diverged logically, and we cannot completely separate them.

Fourth, we are correctly suspicious of people that insist on the ideals of their religion and morality even when we agree with the ideals of their religion and morality. When somebody insists that we never steal, or that we love our neighbor fully and at all times, we should be suspicious. We can suspect them of having ulterior motives and of using religion and morality as a cover for what they really want. We should suspect people that want us to be too good. When conservative Christians say that the poor should be

harshly punished for stealing, then we should be suspicious, especially when liberal Christians use lobbyists as the means to steal from the government. When liberal Christians tell us that we have to love everybody, we should be suspicious, especially when liberal Christians do not love conservatives and when they want to force us to give full moral status to people we do not like such as child molesters. We have to think, "What do they really want?"

We need to think about the balance of human nature and ideals without betraying our ideals and without betraying the need to make a living and raise families. This is not easy to do. Part of worthwhile life is trying.