

16 Common Mistakes

This chapter describes some common mistakes in themes, stances, and religions. This chapter does not assess whole religions such as Christianity or Taoism; see later chapters. This chapter does not include every mistake. Many mistakes are natural and hard to avoid. If we never make mistakes, we drift into austerity. We can still make some mistakes and not betray our ideals. Many points are written in terms of God and Jesus. Feel free to use “Dharma” or “Tao”. I do not give an evolutionary basis for the tendency to make particular mistakes but there usually is one. Feel free to skip around at first but please do read all the mistakes eventually.

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

The middle way is not always correct and it is not always best. When a child has misbehaved, it seems the middle way is talking to the child, and it seems talking lies between doing nothing versus hitting the child. Yet sometimes talking to the child is not enough, and a parent has to take harsher steps such as hitting, withholding a treat, or a “time out”. Sometimes a child is overwhelmed by a temptation too great for its age, or just makes an honest mistake, in which leniency is best. You have to use judgment.

PART 1: Going Overboard

Sects.

Some stances are only mistakes when viewed from the perspective of a big religion. From the point of view of the stance, it is correct. Christianity began as a “commune” on the edge of Judaism. Mormonism (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) began as radicals on the edge of Christianity. Buddhism began as the (largely correct) rationalizations of a failed ascetic in a forest. Some stances fit types of people, so, even if a stance is not orthodox, and not for everybody, it is right for the people who join - as long as the people join voluntarily, are adults, can leave when they wish, and the stance does no evil. Many early converts to Mormonism were women who found husbands, even as co-wives; and I see little wrong with finding a husband. In Roman Catholic nations, the people who join intense Protestant sects often are go-getter business people who need a rationale for their personality and actions, or are poor people who need to find work. People outside the Protestants think of them as cults or gangs, and thus necessarily bad, but, for the people inside, they are not. People in small Christian churches that stress spiritual gifts (magical powers) and stress direct contact with Jesus often feel just fine. Most such groups that stress magic are found on the edges of major religions. Many are quite similar if we disregard fussy points of doctrine to look at the main themes in group life; Christian Science, Scientology, and “being all you can be” are fairly similar. The ideological and mutual-support groups among professional academics,

such as enthusiasts of evolution and atheists, seem like cults. I cannot assess all these types of groups in this book. All I did here is to mention a few to get the idea across.

Any group is wrong if it forces people to join, or forces them to stay once they are in, especially if it takes children and then does not allow them to choose when the children are old enough. Of course, once inside a small strong group, it is hard to leave even if group members are kind and non-coercive, but that is not what I mean. Some groups coerce members even without explicit violence. As I was writing this, several media stars were leaving the Church of Scientology because they said it was badly coercive.

I don't like groups that recruit members by appealing to human foibles, and then retain members by social pressure - even without violence. I don't like groups that hold beliefs contrary to science and that appeal to our need for relation with powerful spirits. I don't like groups that pervert our imaginations. I don't like groups that preach exaggerated abilities such as flying or reading minds, or that offer amazing success such as wealth and power. This list includes most major religions at one time in their history, or includes groups within all major religions, so I have to be careful with blanket condemning. The fact that all major religions have made these mistakes is one reason why atheists don't like religion.

As an example of a generally good group that does not appeal to everybody, think of the Amish. I do not describe Amish beliefs or their way of life. According to them, they are true Christians, but, according to other Christian groups, they are different enough to be suspect. They are strict, simple, mix democracy with the autocracy by men, sexist, have "traditional" gender roles, oppose technology that is artificially powered, dress strangely, focus on farming, and grow food that is wholesome because it is "organic". Aside from having too many children for the modern world, they do little harm, and do much good. My wife and I used to live near Amish, and we loved to buy food from them and talk to them. Mennonites are similar but they accept mechanized technology. Mennonites are business people with strong prosperous communities, and focus on farming. I had the pleasure of doing fieldwork among them. Some Buddhists in Thailand have independently adopted similar lifestyles, including the "organic" farming, as have some Jews in America, but not as farmers.

All major religions have subgroups that hark back to an older purer mostly imaginary time, dress as if they lived in the idealized past, and adopt ways they think reflect the ideals of the religious founders. All major religions have groups that live very strictly according to a strong set of rules. "The Early Christians" are a favorite made-up idealized group that Christian churches and sects like to follow.

In their own way, motorcycle gangs (clubs) are similar to religious groups that are strict and that yearn for an idealized false simple heroic past. Motorcycle gangs simply replaced horses in cowboy movies with their preferred brand of bike, and put on chaps. Instead of following an imaginary Jesus, they follow an imaginary Jesse James from the American 1870s. If motorcycle gangs did not make a living through bad kinds of crime (such as pimping, selling bad drugs, and extortion), then they would be even more like strict alternative religious groups.

Not "Nothing But"; Speculating on Hidden Motives.

Resist the temptation to dismiss an idea or behavior as "nothing but", as in "American football is nothing but repressed homosexuality emerging through sport" or "enjoy show tunes is so gay". Especially resist

the temptation to dismiss another stance or religion as nothing but, as in “Islam is nothing but the desire to dominate people dressed up as an ideology of ‘we-are-right’ monotheism”, or “Christianity is nothing but the morality of slaves insinuated on other people through guilt as a way to gain control”.

Assess ideas and behaviors in themselves before reducing them to “nothing but”.

Once you have assessed ideas and behaviors in themselves, then it is correct, and often fun, to guess how these ideas and behaviors express other ideas and behaviors. It makes sense to ask about the sexual component in sports, for men and women. It makes sense to wonder if a religion expresses the morality of a particular socio-economic-cultural class of people, and whether that particular stance is good for everybody. It makes sense to ask if a religion is a disguise for other motives.

Along with asking about motives, ask about consequences. Suppose Christianity is a “slave religion”? Does it still do a lot of good? Can it be mixed with other stances to do a lot of good? Is “bleeding heart” a stance only for safe suburbanites? Does it still do some good? Is ghetto tough guy only a scared little boy even if he has a cocked loaded gun?

When you ask about what-all mixes in with a stance, ask yourself about your own stances as well. It is unlikely you hold your own stances purely. It is likely your hidden motives affect how you assess other stances and that your hidden motives lead you to see other ideas and behaviors in terms of nothing but. You can assess other people much better after you have done a little house cleaning. This activity is painful but worth it. It takes practice. This is what Jesus meant when he said first to clear out the two-by-four from your own eye before you criticize the sawdust speck in your neighbor’s eye.

Evolved Basis and “Nothing But”.

Since about 1990, a popular “nothing but” increasingly has been based in biology, whether the biology is well founded or badly founded. Sometimes the biology is based on misreading our evolutionary history and sometimes it is just forcing our ideas onto nature: “male sports are nothing but an indirect way of deciding dominance and access to women”, “cheerleading is nothing but a display to show males what they get when they win sporting combats”, “everybody is basically bisexual, so all sex behavior is only learned artificial stereotyped roles”, “women and men don’t differ at all in any way”, and “all children are equally interested in dolls and trucks”. People of all politics make this mistake because we like to ground our explanations in human nature and like to ground our idea of human nature in nature. Just because you can find a plausible biological story to rationalize a behavior does not mean your explanation is the only, overall, or best explanation. It does not mean your explanation is even partly true. Enjoy biological explanations, and use them if you are skillful at it, but be careful to consider other explanations and be careful not to lapse into “nothing but”.

Society Made Me Do It.

In the movie “West Side Story”, one of the delinquent Jets tells Police Officer Krupke, “I’m depraved on account of I’m deprived”. The curse of my time in anthropology graduate school was social reductionism in which all individuals had to follow social rules, and social rules explained all important behavior. Rules based on power and class counted as social rules. Rules did not have to be conscious, and rules could

be encoded in symbols, myths, stories, social structures, art, and religion. The idea that people act only because of social rules makes as little sense as saying all people who watch the latest Star Trek movie leave the theater to adopt the identity of Kirk, Spock, McCoy, or the villain in real life. Homophobes only “beat up queers” because society said so. Girls who get pregnant unmarried only do it because their group values motherhood so much. Financiers rigged the housing market because that is part of their culture. Greedy house buyers took unrealistic bad loans on huge houses because that is the American dream. Nobody can resist society, nobody can help it, nobody bears any responsibility, and there are no criminals.

We do follow social rules, but that is not all we do, and, even then, we do it often out of self-interest. How self-interest and social rules coincide is not the focus here. It makes as much sense, and nonsense, to use social stories to explain behavior as it does to use biological stories. Take the same precautions with both stories. I prefer the biological stories and I prefer to take self-interest into account first.

Widespread Focus or Narrow Focus.

None of these conditions make an idea wrong or right, although people mistakenly argue from them that an idea is wrong or right:

- An idea is widespread
- An idea appeals to human needs and so is widespread
- An idea is hard to understand, appeals to smart people, and is “sort of” a secret
- Anybody can understand an idea, it is simple and clear

H.L. Mencken famously said something like, “For every complex difficult problem there is a solution that is clear, simple, and wrong”. Ideas should be judged on the basis of their likely truth. Criteria for judging on the basis of likely truth do not include any of the above conditions. The above conditions can be used as signals to make us curious or suspicious but, by themselves, they are not criteria for judging ideas.

The idea of ghosts is widespread and likely appeals to basic evolved human needs but that does not make it wrong or right. I think it is wrong for a lot of reasons that I don’t go into here. The idea that God sends a savior (messiah, Christ, avatar, Maud-dib, or bodhisattva) is widespread in state societies but that does not make the idea wrong or right. I think it is wrong. The idea that God sends teachers and prophets is widespread, and I think it is right, but I have little hard evidence for saying so.

Relativity in physics is well known but only a few people understand it. The few who do understand it agree it is correct. That does not make it correct. The reasoning and the evidence make it correct; on that basis, it has done well. The idea that we are all part of a never-ending joyous system of many lives is hard to understand, and only a few people really do understand it. The few people that do understand it seem to enthusiastically endorse it. That does not make it correct. I think it is wrong. I call on the people who think it is true to supply good evidence. Some alternative and-or independent rock music appeals to only a few people, most of them are smart, but few even of them really get it very well. The fact that only a few smart people get an art form does not make the ideas in it right or wrong, better or worse.

Religious ideas are more likely to be correct if they are simple, almost everybody can get them, they give a basis for good action, provide clear goals, and nearly everybody can see the goals and carry out the actions consistent with their lives. This is a big reason why I favor the teachings of Jesus. But I have no hard evidence these criteria are absolutely reliable for true ideas. I use the criteria without justifying them. At least I am clear about what criteria I use and any justification or non-justification.

My Stance is All Right and Your Stance is All Wrong.

This mistake does not need much explanation. We are rarely all right, and the other fellow is rarely all wrong. We can usually benefit from seeing our faults and from seeing the other fellow's strengths.

The real issue with this stance comes when the other fellow is wrong enough to do damage, and when we are right enough that we should prevail. This is the question of a "just war". Sometimes you have to stand your ground even when there is a dead skunk lying on it. That commitment is part of what makes us human, it is something God understands, and it is something God wants out of us sometimes. The problem is that there are no sure guidelines, and that it is easy to make a mistake in over-stressing the value of our stance and over-stressing the danger from the other fellow. Without going into a treatise, I cannot offer any good advice, and so I stop here.

Jesus' life and death seems to say it is better to die rather than to harm another person, even when we know we are right, we know they are wrong, and even when the other person will hurt our family, friends, nation, and faith. It seems better to die and to let your entire faith die too rather than to hurt the other fellow. Maybe in so doing, our own faith mysteriously comes back to life again, but there is no guarantee of this miracle. Most people cannot take the chance of resurrection, and most people cannot follow the teaching of Jesus in this regard. You have to choose for yourself how far you are willing to follow Jesus down this road, and, if you cannot follow Jesus very far, you have to make sense of that for yourself in light of your particular faith. Some Buddhists and Hindus face this same problem although it is not posed in terms of the life history of their religious leader but in terms of a strong principle of their faith. Hindus and Buddhists tell stories of great religious adepts dying rather than harming someone else, or harming even an animal. Again, I have to let the issue go here.

In accepting our own human weakness, we do not have to accept that the other fellow is always more right than we are and we do not have to accept that all paths are equal. Those are serious mistakes. Sometimes the other fellow is wrong, and not all paths are equal. We have as much responsibility to point out problems in other stances as we do to accept problems in our stance. Wishy-washy pseudo-egalitarianism is as harmful as selfishness.

God is on Our Side.

In the opening scenes of the classic movie "The Longest Day", soldiers on both sides declare, no matter what happens to them individually, or what happens in any particular battle, in the end, their side will win the war because God is on their side. This is a self-validating idea. Whichever side wins, its historians would give credit to God as a way to justify the war and validate the state. Victory does not insure that God was on your side and loss is not a sign that God was against you.

Maybe in ancient Israel, God was on somebody's side. Since then, God has not been on anybody's side. I doubt God is on the side even of modern Israel. Some good nations and good causes have won key victories, as in World War Two and the Cold War, but not because God was on their side. They won because of planning, execution, intelligence, bravery, and luck. Too many good causes have lost, and too many bad causes have won, to think God supports one side or another. God depends now on good-hearted, clear-thinking, brave people to defend the right side.

Ideology is not Enough; Decency is Enough.

Personal religious success cannot depend on correct dogma. I have never read any thinker who had all the right answers. This book does not have all the right answers. If going to heaven (or other religious success) depended on the correct dogma, then all the theologians would be in hell, including Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and many Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus that I won't name.

Sectarians say acting well is not enough; doing good is not enough. You must have the right ideas about God, grace, justification, salvation, enlightenment, sudden enlightenment, Dharma, karma, Tao, Heaven, the status of Mohammad, or the force of natural selection. If no dogma is right enough, then their dogma is not right enough either.

If dogma is not right enough, then decency and goodness are enough. Decency and goodness do not get you into heaven because heaven is irrelevant. They do not justify you or save you. Acting decently and acting well promote goodness in the world and they prepare you to meet God. That is enough. God is much happier over a person who struggles to do the right thing, tries hard to make the world better, and succeeds once in a while, than over a brilliant theologian, atheist, or Darwinist who accidentally gets right a point of dogma.

If decency, goodness, and working hard to make the world better are enough without dogmas, then much formal religion, theology, and secular theology, is not important. In some ways, I am sorry, because much of the formal apparatus is beautiful and interesting. Formality does good sometimes through education, charity, promoting social order, and support against tyranny. It does not always get at the correct positive dogma but it can cut some errors. Formal dogma can be fun for people with the right character; it is their way of using imagination. I don't aim to abolish all formal religion by saying that decency and goodness are enough. I merely make sure good decent normally fallible people are not frightened by dogmas and dogmatists.

Collectivism and Individualism.

During the 1990s and 2000s, there were two certain ways to get a rise out of hipsters and right wingers. First, say "we are all one and mystically connected". Second, say "we are all out for ourselves alone, and capitalism is the one institution that suits human nature best". You are damned if you do and damned if you don't. A great failing of American intellectuals since about 1975 is not to find the right balance between individuals and collectives, and not to find institutions that teach and support the right balance. Semi-educated semi-intellectuals with opinions, of the Right and Left, have not made much progress either.

The best way to see the evolution of human nature is through individuals. Individuals act to get greatest reproductive success. Yet, in acting as individuals, people have to consider kin, relations to group mates, and relations to other groups. Successful moral good guys have to consider the acts of bad guys; and even bad guys have to consider the ability of good guys to rally against them. We are never fully isolated atomic individuals as in market-worship fantasy “rugged individual” capitalism, and we are never all linked in a swarm of warm puppies as in false nature-and-cosmic-spirit worship. We act mostly as individuals but not as selfish isolated idiots. We can, and do, feel for each other. We form groups for mutual benefit and protection. We seek institutions that allow us to live together but still to seek our personal success. We have not found them lately.

Here is not the place to settle the questions. The point here is not simply to make fun of the extremes as hipsters, right wingers, and pseudo-intellectuals do, and not to fall for any stance, ideology, politics, or religion that offers simple solutions. Think it out for yourself. When you can settle on the right balance of realistic self-interest and empathy, think about the institutions that can teach this balance and support this balance.

Cosmic Significance.

“I got dem Ol’ Cosmic Blues again”.

“I am of the Universe, and you know what It’s worth”.

The first line is from Janis Joplin, a rock singer from the 1960s and early 1970s. The second line is from John Lennon, an ex-member of a boy band from the same period.

People want to find cosmic significance in the things of daily life or in the events of daily life that are even a bit unusual. People want to make their lives meaningful by making them metaphysical. We likely have a deep evolved basis not only to do this for ourselves but to try to get other people to go along with us. We are more important when we are cosmic, and other people are likely to do what serves us when they think we are cosmic.

In the 1800s, this tendency was obvious in all the capitalized words: Life, Destiny, Progress, Emotion, Passion, Nature, Process, Commerce, Working People, etc. In the 2000s, we do it just as much but we know better than to capitalize our fantasies. You can’t just have the blues; you have the old cosmic blues. You can’t just see berries ripen in the garden; you see Nature Unfolding. You can’t just send your kids off to college; you participate in the never-ending cycle of birth, death, and renewal. You can’t just fight with your girlfriend or boyfriend; you participate in the battle of the sexes. The battle of the sexes is not just the legacy of different paths in natural selection; it is the never-ending wrestle of opposites. Jesus did not just come to teach outstanding principles at a time in history when they would catch on; he was God on Earth. The rise of gay rights is not just the victory of a well-educated affluent useful group of some citizens in a democracy; it is the victory of oppressed peoples everywhere over reactionaries and miscreants who use religion as a tool of control. The Buddha did not just teach reasonableness and good sense; he was the repeating manifestation of the great joyous Dharma system coming to know itself and save itself. Mohammad was not just a teacher of the one moral God, who converted superstitious Arabs; he was the last and greatest of prophets whose every word is God itself. Confucius was not just a great

teacher of moral social relations; he was the agent of Heaven to the Middle Kingdom of China. Singers are not must singers; they are artists. Musicians are not just artists; they are creators. Adolph Hitler was not just trying to conquer Europe and then the world; he was carrying out the last act of the Aryan Race Asserting its Natural Supremacy and thus asserting Nature. The world is not now beset merely by clumsy modernism versus fundamentalist reactionary clinging; America is at War with Islam as the soldiers of Good versus Evil; which side is which depends on where you were born. The latest academic fad is not just a curious potentially useful idea but a tremendous insight that will unlock the secrets of nature and society and let us all get along in justice and prosperity.

We are a lot better off if we practice seeing the events of our lives and of world history in normal terms as much as possible. Normal life has enough need for heroism and strenuous effort, and we are better off if we see our actions in those limited terms. We don't need to see ourselves in cosmic metaphysical terms. We can resist our biologically-based tendency to see ourselves in cosmic terms, and we should be ready to see when we have gone too far.

Thinking in cosmic terms is a lot of fun, and it is natural. Likely we can't entirely avoid thinking in cosmic terms unless we are a Taoist or Zen adept. Thinking cosmically gets things done, as with the American Revolution as the spearhead of Freedom and with Gay Rights as the spearhead of Social Justice and Common Sense about Society. As always, the trick is finding the balance.

The problem with seeing in cosmic terms is not just that we go off on tangents, overlook what we should do, and cause more harm than if we just sat still. The problem is that we are confused and blind. We get into bad mental habits. Once we fall for once cosmic cause we are susceptible to others and we are not susceptible to plain simple truth. It is like falling into Romanticism.

Likely the best antidote to losing yourself in cosmic terms is to inoculate yourself by doing it a couple of times on a small scale early so you will be immune to big versions later on. Usually that is what youth is for, but, recently in America, cosmic confusion has infected too many adults.

Religious Leaders as Cosmic Principles.

Several times in this book I say that people want a mediator between them and God (Dharma, Divine, Heaven, Tao, Buddha Mind, etc.); and I understand this as a human tendency such as when people use their mother to mediate access to their father; but I don't fully understand why the idea finds its way into the center of high religions and why religious thinkers not only keep the idea there but make much of it. This section is a variation on the theme of my disapproval.

The major figures in major religions often become cosmic principles. Usually the figures embody more than one cosmic principle, such as mercy, beauty, love, and order. Sometimes they embody all good cosmic principles as Christians try to do with Jesus, Muslims with Mohammad, and Mahayana Buddhists do with some bodhisattvas. Often one major figure is chosen to embody evil as with Satan in Christianity and Islam, or as with personifications of Maya in Buddhism and Hinduism. In their roles as good cosmic principles, good religious leaders also act as mediators.

All this is a mistake. It diverts us away from a more realistic view of the world, away from better thinking about how ideas and principles work in the world, better thinking about how God made the world, and about how God relates to the world. We are better off thinking of religious leaders, even mythical leaders, as merely people and thinking about their message instead.

I do not make much of my objection in this book. Once I began cataloging how major religions turn their leaders into cosmic principles, and how the particular idea of a cosmic principle as embodied in a major leader affects the character of the religion, or reveals its character. I was going to use this approach as a way to explain and assess major religions but the material got out of hand. I mention it sometimes when it is useful.

Just to be clear, I repeat that ALL major religions err. Judaism turned Moses, David, and Solomon into cosmic principles of Leadership, Obedience, Creativity, Newness, Righteous Rebellion, and Wisdom. Early Christians turned Jesus into THE cosmic principle, and the mistake stuck. Islam turned Mohammad into the cosmic principles of God's Will, Obedience, and Access to Divine Knowledge embodied. Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu are the Tao embodied. Lao Tzu is Yielding embodied while Chuang Tzu is Playful Spontaneity. Confucius is Heaven condensed into a man. Confucius is Proper Order embodied. Mahayana turned the Buddha into the cosmic principle of a good system in which life is worthwhile. All bodhisattvas are variations on the theme, and on Compassion and Sacrifice as well. Even Theravada turned the real Buddha into the cosmic principles of Aloofness and Superiority. Hinduism is the greatest machine for cosmic principles ever devised. Brahma embodies amoral creativity; Vishnu embodies sustaining a marvelous system; and Shiva embodies the transition from an outmoded bad old particular instance of the system to a better new instance. Some mystics dwell in waves of cosmic principles manifested. Some mystics claim to transcend the idea of cosmic principles manifested but then claim that a person can embody the transcendence of cosmic principles.

Thinking of a religious leader as the manifestation (embodiment) of cosmic principles actually betrays the idea of a person and radically changes how we respond to all people. I think it betrays how Jesus wished us to think of people, including him, and it diverts us away from his teachings. This topic too is too large for this book, and I might take it up later.

Mystic Conspiracy of Events; Those Patterns in the World.

There is no fate, destiny, secret calling, mission from God (except for maybe a few people about whom I am unqualified to write), mystic forces, and no mystic conspiracy of events. Believing in any of this is the personal version of giving normal events a cosmic significance they might not deserve.

Many things happen in the world at a variety of levels. The world falls into many patterns. We read meaning into events to give meaning to our lives, make us more effective, and usually to help us in our quest for success. We evolved lively imaginations. There is nothing wrong with that if we don't do it too much and don't read too much into it. We should not find a cosmic significance behind the fall of every leaf, every ripple of every stream, everything fades away, or every tear that blends into the rain – poets notwithstanding. You have to find your own balance. Two movies that give both a funny critique and some encouragement are the classic "Blues Brothers" and "The Men Who Stared at Goats", with an all-star cast on a romp.

The world gives many opportunities, most small, but some big. We can make more for ourselves, again most small, but some big. Out of the opportunities, we choose. We feel the world is inviting us personally along some path when really all that happens is an open-minded life in the real world. Our choice feels as if we are pursuing our destiny along the offered path when all we are doing is working hard to make sure it all comes out in the end. If we do good along the way, and don't lose our other common sense, then it is not bad to feel as if the world offered us a destiny and we followed a path.

A mountain, a canyon, a cathedral, and a landslide are all made up of a bunch of rocks but they are not all the same. The different organizations found in each thing mean something. But what? One firefly alone in a valley can be hauntingly beautiful. A handful is fun. A valley full is beautiful in a different way. What do we make of the two facts that a stupid insect can flash and that so many stupid insects can all flash together?

Of course, physicists, chemists, and biologists have explanations for most of this stuff. We don't have to go against science to feel their explanations are not enough. Recently on the news, I saw a story about a boy who had epilepsy, got hit on the head, was largely cured of epilepsy, and then developed aptitude in music. I have no doubt that neuroscience can tell us a lot about this case, but that is not what we want to know. Why this boy now? Why this aptitude? What should the boy do with his new talent? We want to know the significance of the patterns produced by blind nature, if they have any. It is not stupid to think they do have meaning and to want to know. It is only stupid to seek a cosmic explanation for everything, in particular necessarily for yourself.

Our lives do have meaning. We make meaning. We make meaning by seeing our lives in terms of the working of the universe. I have done that throughout this book. Sometimes great causes require great commitment, and we can only get great commitment in cosmic terms. The American Revolution was not just the refusal by well-to-do colonists to pay taxes but was a real change in how people saw their selves, human government, and human life on planet Earth. The tendency to see in cosmic terms is one of the features that make Indo-European culture great. It helped spread American culture around the world through its art. Without it, there would be no epic movies such as "Godfather", "2001", and "Star Wars". But we can overdo it. We don't have to see it everywhere and we don't have to make it a habit. We have to be able to back off when we overdo it.

We do a lot better when we think we are fated to do what we are doing. We do a lot better when we think we are called to a particular vocation. For nearly all people, this is likely not so. Few people are fated to become soldiers, doctors, politicians, anthropologist, or dental hygienists but they do better they think that is their fate. Once you settle into a track, it is hard to get out, and then it is better to accept what is going on and work hard at it. Thinking it is our fate helps.

Some people feel they are destined for greatness, and don't have to be specific about the field. They work hard, and sometimes deviously, to achieve greatness. In movies and TV, the world villain usually feels this way, and feels thwarted too. Luckily, I have met few people who had this attitude although I have met too many people who felt they were better than everybody else, entitled, and so they work hard and connive hard to dominate. Usually, though, people who feel they are destined for greatness do more good than harm and they are not hard to get along with. I think Abraham Lincoln and George Washington

at some time knew they were destined for a great reputation, and decided to do good things to earn the reputation.

The world offers not only opportunities but problems. Some problems are big, such as the Axis powers in World War Two, poverty, the assault on nature, the flaws of capitalism, and how to maintain freedom in the modern world. Among the people alive at any time, some of them must face the problems, such as the soldiers in a war; and some people choose to fight the problems, such as the people working to help animals and maintain natural diversity. They can feel as if facing the problem is their destined task. Yet even in this case, likely no particular person had that destiny, and the world would have gone on, albeit different, if the people had not chosen to face the problem or if nobody had chosen to face the problem. I am glad some people are fighting to keep chimpanzees, tigers, and fish from going extinct, but, if those animals do vanish, a different world will continue on. Other people will face other problems, and that will be their destined task in their arenas. If it helps to fight a problem if fight it feels like your destined task, it is a real problem, and you do more good than harm, then go ahead and feel that way.

If you don't feel you have a vocation, calling, destiny, or task, then you can still do a lot of good in many ways, and still be a useful human being. By keeping an open mind, and moving your effort to where you can see it might do the best good, you might do more good than somebody who has been called to save the world. Giving money to United Way, the Red Cross, or World Wildlife Fun can do more good than you can imagine.

Family and Friends.

Here is the middle class version of a common fantasy: A group of family-and-friends is having a long Saturday party at somebody's nice home, from afternoon through dinner. The food is good. Much of the food has been made by the hosts, some of it has been brought by guests who make their specialties, and some was bought from good local restaurants or delis. In between meals and after dinner, people talk, gossip, drink, watch sports, sitcoms, or goofy adventures on TV, watch movies, play with the kids, talk a little business, family-and-friends, or politics. Everybody is well-educated, smart, and successful in his-her field including home care. People discuss who to vote for in the next election, who is right and who is wrong, the progress of women or gays, the progress of faith-based initiatives, or other favorite issues. They might even talk about what to do on a personal level. People might go home a bit buzzed but nobody ever gets in a car accident, and, in a few weeks, they all do it again at somebody else's home.

The movie comedy "Dewey Cox" is about a made-up country music star. Dewey made every mistake ever written in the tabloids including drugs, sex, and fad religions. The movie borrows from the lives of Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, Glen Campbell, the Beatles, and others. When his career falters in his late middle age, Dewey discovers all his family and friends that he had abused and left behind. At a concert near the end of his life, he declares he finally learned that life is all about family and friends. Especially since the rise of wedding movies, baby movies, and other family movies in the 1980s, this opinion has become dogma in America.

There is nothing terribly wrong with "family and friends". There is a lot right with this. It is successful by the standards of nearly all people all around the world, it is what most religions really secretly teach, and it is successful by the standards that evolution gave us. I wish I had enjoyed these kinds of family-and-

friends scenarios far more often than I have had. In the movie “Man on Fire”, Denzel Washington takes on the job of bodyguard to a young Dakota Fanning. At first, he is nearly alcoholic and nearly suicidal. Then he grows to love Dakota Fanning almost as his own daughter. His love for her saves both of them. That is a good version of this attitude.

Yet, unless you are a wounded person who can only be healed through love of family and friends for you, or from you to them, this attitude is not enough. It is not simple decency. It is not learned decency. It is not working hard to make a better world. You have to do more. You have to decide how much more. You have to decide if you have to give up a little bit of this dream to do more, and what you have to give up. That was the lesson of “The Last Temptation of Christ” by Nikos Kazantzakis.

Better Than Family Values.

You have to be more than just a good family person. You can be good in religion without being a family person at all. Religion is bigger than families. To make family the center of religion is to commit idolatry. 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 his teachings. To substitute family values for the teachings of Jesus is the same as to substitute romantic self-indulgence for the teachings of Jesus. You come short of the mark. You sin.

People need a god as the patron of family life in general, of their kind of family life in particular, and even of their own particular families. In Rome and China, ancestors became minor gods who defended their descendants. In traditional Mormon Utah, God wanted polygamy (one man with several wives). In the Old Testament, God helped the Israelites proliferate in part by approving polygamy, and God tolerated prostitution. Yet now in America, apparently God wants us all to be strictly monogamous, celibate at marriage, have only one sexual partner our entire lives, and never 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 sex 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.

Collecting Experiences.

“In the end, you regret more what you didn’t do than what you did do”. That saying might be more true than false but it can feed some self-indulgent mistakes. Life is not all about collecting experiences. We do not have a more successful life if we have more experiences and more varied experiences. God might look through our eyes sometimes, but God does not need to look through our eyes to know what a sunset looks like and does not need to taste through our tongues to know the joy of ice cream. A person who has skydived from 20,000 feet and has snorkeled the Great Barrier Reef has not necessarily lived more and lived better than a person who has “only” coached Little League Baseball. Very likely, a person who has made a hard moral decision, such as served on a jury, has lived better. The moral decisions that you

have to make as a Little League coach likely are deeper and more important than skydiving or seeing the Great Barrier Reef. Life does not become about more experiences, or more amazing experiences, but about accepting the current situation and dealing with the current situation correctly. Life is fun, and it is right to enjoy life, but life is not only fun, and you miss out on the best experiences if you don't face up to that too.

Life is an Adventure.

This mistake is a version of turning our lives into a cosmic principle. This mistake comes in many flavors, and I can't cover them all. The first flavor comes directly out of the idea that life is all about collecting experiences or that God collects experiences through us. That is not true, and no more need be said.

The second flavor is that life is only worthwhile if it is a grand adventure such as starring on Broadway or being the first person on Mars. Many lives are quite worthwhile that have no grand adventures as long as they deal with the current situation and face the moral conflicts that people have to face. A useful life is a worthwhile life. I suspect that many lives of grand adventure are not necessarily worthwhile. God knows already what it is to star on Broadway and what Mars is like. God does not need you to walk to the South Pole barefoot. He does not need us to feel anything for him, and we cannot let ourselves think we lead a worthwhile life because we generate new and unusual feelings for God. Feeling amazing feelings for ourselves is certainly fun and is a step in the right direction but it is not necessarily all there is or the best there is.

The same thing over and over is boring. We should enjoy life. Life is more enjoyable if it is an adventure. For life to be an adventure, it helps to do new things from time to time, hopefully often. It helps to get out of ourselves, take chances, escape boundaries, and even sometimes act naughty. That is all true but it is not the end of the matter. If that is all we do, even if we keep doing it, then we have fallen into another rut even if the new rut goes off in a different direction. Variety and thrills can be a rut too. You enjoy life more if you deal with the current situation as it is, and with all the human problems that come up, while you vary your life and seek new experiences. If you are ready to do that, then you can seek and enjoy adventure at the same time. For a silly version, see the movie "Hall Pass".

If individual people want to run around the world having fun and seeking new things, I don't seem much wrong with that. Usually these people are a lot of fun, and make the world more interesting, even if they can be a little crazy too. If some individuals use the idea of "life is an adventure" to avoid dealing with real life and real problems, that is their arena. I don't have much to say about them as long as they don't lead too many other people into silliness. It is up to parents to give their children the right balance of lust for adventure with stodginess, and so protect them from silly adventurers.

As with raising the ordinary into the cosmic, the real problem with "life as an adventure" is that it makes us think badly. We do silly things, we do what we did not originally intend, and we do the opposite of what we intended. Adventurers think of themselves as romantic rugged individuals but big-scale adventure takes a cause and a group. In the adventure of rebellion against the evil capitalist empire or in service to God and country, people get sucked into wacky groups. People get sucked into big systems that eat the world, sometimes into cults, and they never make it out. I don't know if Americans are particularly prone to this problem but it seems they are. Americans treat religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism as

adventures before Americans realize that religions require a commitment to a point of view and a society, and that the point of view and society are not usually what Americans think of as adventure. Americans tend to see a cause such as “save the planet” and “save the unborn” as adventures without thinking through what is really going on, what is won and lost, and that the cause requires a commitment that is not compatible with the romantic idea of adventure.

PART 2: Standard Errors of Official Religion.

The Bible is not Infallible. Other Religious Texts are not Infallible.

“The Bible” includes the Tanakh (Old Testament) and the Christian New Testament. The Bible is not science. The Bible is not an objective explanation of history, biology, physics, political science, or even theology. It is a collection of stories, some of which are based on real historic events, and some of which teach about morality, life, military strategy, politics, and God. Some messages are good and some bad. The Bible contains few predictions about specific events in the future. The Bible is not consistent, and it can be contradictory. It is not self-evident. It requires some interpretation to understand. People select what they will take seriously and what they will ignore. People interpret what they take seriously to suit their own needs. 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. The Bible does not speak to many modern issues such as cloning. Many issues we have to decide apart from the Bible such as whether to have national health care. Even when the Bible is clear on some issues such as helping the poor, many Christians apparently decide 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. Even in those cases, do not forget the potential for dispute. For example, if we 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 fall back on the fact 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.

What is true of the Bible is as true of all religious texts. They are not science texts or history texts even if they have some science or history in them. They are not always true. They contradict each other. They contradict themselves. They have to be selected from and interpreted. People disagree in selections and interpretations. You may take them above science and common sense only at extreme risk.

Divine Gifting.

See “Giving Back and Forth” in the previous chapter.

People that believe in spirits think we can get into a relation with a spirit by giving the spirit a gift. Both ideas are wrong. There are no 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), 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. Most of what we want is silly.

The only real gifts we can give to God are a good heart and good actions. The only benefits to us in our relation to God are that the gift we give to God shows to us our intent; it might help us to know 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 about who really benefits and why.

No Negotiating.

Giving a gift to God in hope of getting something good back is negotiating with God. We cannot negotiate with God. As Jim Morrison whined in the 1960s, "You cannot petition the Lord with prayer". We cannot ask things like, "If you save me from this sinking ship, I will say a special prayer everyday for all the rest of my life". Barney Stimpson on the TV show "How I Met Your Mother" cannot promise God to go to church regularly if a woman he had sex with does not get pregnant. We cannot even make really good-hearted laudable bargains such as, "If you save my daughter from cancer, you can kill me right now, or you can give me her cancer instead". In some cases, such as with sick kin, 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 relations 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 only twenty righteous men live there; 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 righteous men living in them, so God smoked the places 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. 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 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. There are no karma points, spiritual points, good deed points, bad deed points, or wish points. We cannot add good points or add bad points. We cannot subtract bad points from good points. We cannot use good points to make up for 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 total of good points minus bad points reaches a certain number. We do not go to hell if the total of bad points minus good points reaches a certain number. 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 nasty little books like Scrooge. 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.

No Karma.

Karma is the idea that “what goes round comes round” or “as you sow, so shall you reap”. For the most part, it is true, but not because of any cosmic principles. People are nice to people who are nice to them for practical reasons that I don’t go into here. People are bad to people who are bad to them for practical reasons that I don’t go into here. People are good to people who are good generally and not only good to them right now, as long as being good to them doesn’t cost too much, because people who are good generally are useful to have around and often do help us eventually. People are not nice to people who are bad generally to other people because those bad people are likely to hurt us. People are bad to bad people when it is not too costly or too dangerous. People are more likely to act like this in close groups where everybody knows everybody well and where people interact often. We develop the idea that we get what we deserve, which some people call “karma”. We also develop the idea that we deserve what we get, but that is another topic. Once the idea of karma arises, in some form, as it certainly will, then it perpetuates itself.

If people got what they deserve strictly, then good people would prosper and bad people would suffer. Because that outcome is clearly not so, the idea of “getting what you deserve” has to be modified. The modification most familiar to Jews, Christians, Muslims, many animists, and some Hindus, is that God (some god or the gods) takes care of the differences, usually after we die. To some extent, I go along with this modification.

Another most common modification of the idea that people get what they deserve goes along with the idea that we live many lives, and this modification is the idea that is properly called “karma”. What we did in past lives determines who we are now and what happens to us now. A rich person now was a hard-working peasant in the past. A poor person now was stingy in the past. An obnoxious rich person now was a saintly community worker in a past life; he-she misuses wealth in this life but the merit of the past keeps the wealth now from going away as a result of the demerit of now. A saintly but sickly community worker now was a vicious warrior in a past life; in the past, he-she was strong and hurt people so he-she has to be weak and has to help people now to pay and to make up.

The idea of karma comes in two forms. In the first, karma keeps a strict ledger, so that, for example, all people who eat meat are born as rabbits destined to die by the fox. In the second poetic form, payback is not exact but approximate and poetically fitting. One slum owner might be reborn as a cockroach while

another might be reborn as a tenant in a cockroach-infested slum building. One community worker might be reborn as a kindly senator while another might be reborn as a rich farmer growing organic apples.

Regardless of which form, the idea of karma almost always goes along with a cosmic justice system that operates on its own apart from any decision by any deity. Karma is automatic, inexorable, just, and, over the long run, exact. Karma might be personified by a god but it really does not depend on a deity. Karma depends only on the idea that the universe (Heaven, Dharma) is intrinsically moral in a similar way that a human village is intrinsically moral.

I do not believe in a strict ledger or any points, so there can be no karma in the strict sense. Because we are not often reborn, and are not necessarily reborn, there is not even karma in the poetic sense.

Instead of karma, God assesses us. Certainly God takes into account our intentions and deeds when he talks to us, and he likely treats better people better than worse people. But that result does not amount to karma, not even in the poetic sense. Getting evaluated by your boss is not karma.

It is important to see that “no karma” also means the universe (Heaven, Dharma) is not intrinsically moral, amoral, or immoral. It could be any of those. I think the universe is amoral because that view goes along with my scientific outlook as science is now. Future science might find otherwise but I doubt it. The facts that God is moral, created the universe, and will assess us largely according to our moral behavior, do not mean the universe is moral. The fact that God created the universe so that it would evolve life and evolve life that is sentient, moral, and feels beauty also does not make the universe moral. We are moral, God is moral, and those facts make a difference. The universe is amoral. The amorality of the universe often is sometimes a hindrance to us acting morally but it does not make a big difference; we act morally anyway.

You Deserve What You Get.

The idea of “what goes round comes round” or “karma” has two aspects: (1) you get what you deserve eventually, and (2) you deserve what you get, you deserve what you have now and the situation that you are in now. We all wish the first aspect were always true but it is not, and we have to learn to live with that disappointment. The section above disposed of the first aspect well enough but the second aspect generates some bad mistakes particular to it, so it is worth dwelling on.

People use the idea of “you deserve what you get” to rationalize both the good and bad that happens to individual people and to social groups. If an obvious nasty person is rich and apparently happy, people say he-she must be really smart, must benefit society through businesses, gives secretly to charity, or has a kind heart. Worse, we say that person is beloved of God. God sees in him-her a quality that normal people cannot see; or (slightly differently but close enough) God wishes to use that person for a purpose and so gives that person wealth, power, family, and happiness. If a person suffers for no clear reason, we say the person is a secret sinner and God detests him-her. If an ethnic group is on top of society, we say those are the “good people”. They are clean, athletic, smart, thrifty, inventive, helpful to each other, create business for society, and generally profit society. If an ethnic group suffers for no clear reason, we say God dislikes them, and they are noisy, dirty, stupid, uneducated, create problems, live as leeches off the rest of us, and are immoral.

It is true that we deserve what we get to some extent. Overall, smart people do better than other people and moral people do better than out-and-out immoral people. Hard-working people do better than lazy people. I do not dispute that the slogan has this much truth, and I am glad of it.

But the idea is not true in all cases, and especially it is not true in the sense that God secretly loves some people and so rewards them or God secretly despises some people and so punishes them. Things just happen. People hit bad luck. People hit good luck. Connivers sometimes win. Smart people lay good plans that go astray. Meteors fall on people's heads. The weather turns bad early and a careful investor loses his-her shirt and all the money for the orphans. Ethnic groups get trapped on the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy and don't know how to climb up. The children of rich people stay rich for many generations without working to deserve it. We have to fight the tendency to see in the random events of the world a moral pattern or divine pattern. We have to cultivate the ability to see beyond some outcomes to the events and characters below. Not all outcomes are the result of karma. Some outcomes just happen both to deserving and undeserving people.

Health, wealth, love, and success are not rewards for being righteous, and we should not take them that way. Sickness, poverty, loneliness, and failure are not punishments for sin, and we should not take them that way. Health, wealth, love, sickness, loneliness etc. can be rewards for goodness and sin in this life not because God rewards us but because people respond to us in kind. If you want to take that as God's way of rewarding us, go ahead.

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; we cannot say she provoked it. If a hurricane hits Alabama, it is not because Alabama adopted a lottery. 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-and-orphanage, but that does not happen in real life no matter how much we wish it would.

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, plagues, and earthquakes. Nothing happened, so maybe God approved of their decision and disagreed with Pat Robertson. During the Bush administration, America faced an unprecedented lineup of natural disasters including Hurricane Katrina, drought, and fires and mud slides in the West. 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 bad Republicans. The fact that the problems continued under the Obama administration shows that it is not punishment from God. Instead, it can be taken as the just return on stupidly screwing up the ecology.

One version of this mistake is quite sad. People sometimes think that, if only they are good enough, then things have to turn out all right. If things did not turn out alright, then they weren't good enough. At the risk of sexism, I see this attitude mostly among girls and young women aged about 10 to 30. Women think things will turn out well if only they are sweet enough. If things did not turn out well, that is because

they are a secret bitch deep down. I do not know why women feel this way. It is like the opposite of the book-and-movies “Carrie”, and the book-and-movies are probably successful because they act as a purge for women to get this bad feeling out of their system by reversing it. People with this attitude try so hard to be good that they twist their lives. If things do not turn out, they blame themselves and they sift their lives looking for the tiny fault that provoked God.

No “Instant Karma”.

“Instant karma” is the slang phrase for “what goes round comes round” happening fast. Sometimes in human society, return is fast: neighbor B runs over the cat of neighbor A, so neighbor slashes the tires of neighbor B. Neighbor D helps out when Neighbor E’s mother dies, so neighbor helps out when neighbor D’s beloved old dog dies.

Mostly, though, return is delayed, and, often enough it does not happen at all. Especially God does not intervene to effect instant karma, and more especially God does not intervene to effect instant karma because we secretly deserved it, because we are secretly good or bad. God rarely punishes and rewards us now for our deeds in this life. God might punish and reward us in this life sometimes, but, if so, it is rare and 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 not while still alive except in prayer. If we murder our bad neighbor with the yappy dogs, God does not punish us right now. If God did, there would be much less murder. If we save a drowning child, God does not reward us pretty quick. If he did, there would be many more heroic acts.

More than a Good Citizen.

In a modern democracy, on top of earning a living and raising a family, it is hard to be a good citizen. Most people are not good enough citizens. It is monstrously hard to earn a living, raise a family, be a good citizen, and carry out firm ethical precepts such as from Jesus, the Jewish prophets, Mohammad, the Buddha, or Confucius. Yet that is what is required. It is not enough to be a good citizen. It is not enough to do good by paying your taxes for programs to help the sick and poor. You do not have to go to the local soup kitchen every weekend, but you have to keep your eyes and heart open.

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 when it is bad, 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. 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.

God Does Not Make You Rich.

God does not want to make you rich. The “prosperity gospel” of the televangelists not only is false, it is also immoral. Because wealth often gets in the way of spiritual advancement, if God meddles in your business affairs, it is more likely to keep you modest than to make you rich. If you think God rewards you with wealth for being an especially good person or being especially attentive, then you misunderstand God, goodness, and attentiveness. If you think some spiritual being other than highest God interferes to make you wealthy then you are an idolater and you are misled. Because there is no karma, karma does not make you rich.

According to the Old Testament, God did make some of the patriarchs rich as a way to promote their offspring and the Hebrew nation. But he did not make all the patriarchs, judges, or prophets rich. Some of the prophets were destitute and powerless, and that is what made them interesting and useful to God. Most of us are not prophets and will not found a nation.

Absolute Same.

In the movie series “The Matrix”, Agent Smith is the devil. Machines made him, but then he changed, and now not even his makers can stop him. His chief goal, and main technique, is 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.

Movements of all kinds, religious, political, and intellectual, are like Agent Smith. They make everybody within the movement the same, and they see everybody outside of the movement alike too but in a bad opposite way. People that cannot be the same as “us” are bad. Despite declarations of diversity, die-hard homogenizers include some politically correct (PC) people, gay people, atheists, feminists, rock-n-roll bad girls, liberal Christians, and college freethinkers. Even evolutionary biologists accept as truly astute only other evolutionary biologists and they look askance at people who adopt other explanations such as culture. Conservative Christians and Muslims do it.

It seems as if the answer is some kind of real diversity with real acceptance, and not merely the slogan diversity of PC. But this cannot be quite true either. We really don’t want all kinds to make up our world. We don’t want true bad guys or else we wouldn’t have the police. We don’t want rapists, murderers, and child molesters. We don’t want indecent loud trashy people. We don’t want bad people who seduce our children onto the wrong path. We need people who can help teach life’s hard lessons but we don’t want so many of them that we all turn bad and never get the benefit of the lessons. We want people who can control the bad people for us. We want zealots and town marshals. We want soldiers who sacrifice their lives so our children can lead normal lives. But we don’t want the controllers to turn bad themselves or to make us all into the same sweet candy rabbits.

Groups have an identity. Even when members diverge a little bit, 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 likely accidentally to go against it. If you sign up for Boy Scouts, you have to get the idea of a Boy Scout or you are likely to betray it. The group can tolerate some people who do not get the idea of the group but not too many. Most of the people in the group have to be people who get

the idea of the group and actively support the group and its idea. People that do not get the sense of a group cannot make up much of the membership or the group will fall.

Within our group we want people that both understand basic decency and that get the group identity as well. Whether we like it or not, our group has to be made up mostly of almost-Agent-Smiths or it will fall. Now we return 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. Christian 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 they can get support from 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 always 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. I do not know how to draw the line between “Stepford Wife” versus “Queen of the Damned”.

Faith Is Not Enough.

As a young child, I participated in what was likely the greatest social psychology experiment ever. The Sunday Disney TV program showed the adventures of Peter Pan and Tinkerbell. One day, Tinkerbell was mortally wounded, I think poisoned, but not yet dead. The physical poison represented the spiritual poison that some children did not believe in fairies, not even in Tinkerbell. She would die unless all the children watching believed in her and believed she would recover. Only overwhelming faith could bring her back. I think we had to show our faith by clapping our hands at the right moment. Tinkerbell would hear, know 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 a famous scene 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 Luke failed because he 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 qualitative black-and-white-faith-with-doing can overcome any moral or 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: "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 just because we wish to believe, and faith alone is not enough, and faith might not even be the most important thing. Several times I have 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 you did not believe strongly enough and that you should believe more.

Trying to believe more is making the same mistake as in Pascal's Wager. 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.

Even worse, 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 might 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 of Jesus. Neither will happen. Even if their faith were genuine, it cannot coerce God. When animals get burned, the God decides what to do.

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 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 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 issue is not my business. That is between God and the individual people." I personally think the first two people are in better shape than the last two.

I doubt you can earn your way into heaven, or can 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 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 argue whether 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 provided the world with hardships that would test our characters long before we were born; and without us particularly necessarily in mind. We find our way to the particular situations that give us in particular the hardest problems, something like the opposite of "Seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you". God can find out enough about us from watching us slog through life.

Thinking God tests us is a way to explain evil 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 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.

We think God, or "the world", tests us although we know better. I am not sure why. For a fun example of a great spiritual being testing us, see either version of "Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory", with Gene Wilder or Johnny Depp. Maybe the classic example of testing in Western literature not in a Christian setting is "The Odyssey" ("Story of Ulysses"). See the TV mini-series starring Armand Ashante. Maybe the classic example of testing in Western literature, in a Christian setting, is "Pilgrim's Progress" by John Bunyan, which reminds me of the first movie of the "Never Ending Story" series.

God Gives Us No More than We can Stand.

Everybody has to endure hardship. Often we become better because of the hardship we endure, as long as the hardship does not break us beyond repair. Although God does not test us, God has some control over what we face. People like to think God does not give us more than we can stand. If we can stand it, we can grow from it. In that way, God does not send us tests or lessons in particular but God makes sure what we do face is something we can deal with, learn from, and grow through. This idea does not mean God never allows innocents to suffer; God can still allow children to get cancer as long as having the cancer does not break their souls.

I wish this were true. I wish God never gave us more than we can stand. In a strong version, this idea means God never let people suffer so much that they broke irretrievably. But, in fact, people do suffer so much that they break irretrievably. People who don't deserve to suffer and break still do suffer and do break. There is no point in giving examples. This issue is a nasty version of the greater problem of evil.

The very large majority of the time people can stand what they face and they can turn tragedy into a good thing. Often what appears to be a tragedy at first, such as losing a job, turns into a chance to find things in life that are even more important. But that does not change the fact that some people, through no fault of their own, and with good characters, suffer more than they can stand and do break.

God, through evolution, prepared us to deal with almost everything in the world, and to turn into good a lot of the bad of the world. I am often amazed at how well evolution has prepared us. But evolution did not prepare us for everything, and probably could not prepare us for everything that comes from the physical world and from the evolved world, such as floods and diseases.

I can see why God would allow some badness such as hunger, poisonous snakes, and the flu. I don't see why God allows problems so bad that they break good people. I don't see why God would evolve us to be able to face most problems but not all problems. Probably this situation has to do with the fact that life is real, risky, and interesting. It would not be hard to work up a philosophical justification for it. The idea of karma is, in part, a response to this issue. But I prefer not to "worm around" that way. I think it is better just to face up to the situation. It is something we can ask God about someday.

Whether God sees and feels all that everybody sees and feels, or does not, it still makes sense that God saw and felt what Jesus did. When Jesus died on the cross, he was broken in body and spirit. God can generalize from Jesus to all of us. So God knows what it is like to be broken. He knows what we feel like when we don't make it. I am not sure how much comfort that is generally but it has comforted me often enough.

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 why we have hurt other people. The questions come 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. Many people who have had a near-death experience say they stop worrying about the little things and go on to focus on enjoying life and on doing what is important. 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 walks 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, the sayings of Mohammad, or 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 background, such as when they are all Methodists. Then sometimes, later on, they forget too. Even when they remember, they still seem able to act immorally such as by defrauding the poor. A lot of good Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists who have felt the presence of the Lord (Dharma) 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 soft 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. They do not need the presence of the Lord. They carry the presence of the Lord with them in a simple urge to be decent and help out. I think they are as lucky as the people that do have the experience.

I am not saying 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 almost 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 yet I thought the experience came from the Hindu god Shiva? Or if I was a good Hindu and yet I thought the experience came from the Muslim Allah (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; they say the experience changed their lives by making them appreciate life more, appreciate nature, 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. Awe alone is not enough. Awe and devotion together are 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 God could show how powerful he was, how much he controlled any nation, and how much he favored the Hebrews.

This story is obnoxious but not 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 common 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 hardening hearts is more subtle and not directly obnoxious. It is appealing: God bestows grace on some people by leading them to believe and by saving them. God softens their hearts. God likes some people and so helps them out. It is never clear why God helps some people but not others.

Yet God does not soften hearts any more than he hardens hearts. 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 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 slogan for saving a person by softening the person's heart is “salvation through grace”.

Minimal Magic.

The definition of magic used to be a big topic in anthropology. I don't define it here. Belief in magic gets in the way of true religion, such as following the ideals of Jesus. A little belief in magic is a lot of fun, and can spur us on to good deeds; but too much magic is really harmful.

In the book “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe” by C.S. Lewis, the White Witch (Ice Queen) thinks she has beaten 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). Aslan must allow himself to be killed on an altar. Later when Aslan is resurrected, he reminds the Ice Queen that there is an even deeper magical formula: whenever a good person willingly offers him-herself as a sacrifice, then he-she will return greater than before. This idea is charming and we hope it is true but too often it is not true. If a hero knows he will return from the dead, then that seems to diminish the sacrifice. Jesus might have returned from the dead in that book but other heroes sacrifice themselves for the greater good without the comfort of thinking they will return from the

dead. Harry Potter went to sure death not knowing he would return. Socrates drank the hemlock. I think the real Jesus knew he faced the wrath of the Romans and Jews without thinking he would return if he died. If the idea that true heroes return from the dead stronger than ever is true, then, in a way, it hurts Jesus and the message of Jesus. It is too much clever magic. I want Jesus to make sense. I do not want to rely on magic. I do not want to trick the Ice Queen by pulling Jesus out of a magic hat. We might not be able to reach perfection but we have to actively participate in our spiritual advancement instead of just waiting for God to pull Jesus out of the magic hat.

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 messages 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 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. 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 stance is a kind of pyramid scheme. To focus on the wrapper while forgetting 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.

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 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. There is no other useful idea of salvation.

Saved and Damned.

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 directly thwarts following the ideas of Jesus, in particular because we can only use signs that we make up. 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 About Justification.

People need to feel successful. Salvation is a strong kind of success. Especially in Indo-European (Western and Indian) cultures, and Judeo-Christian-Islamic cultures, people also need to feel justified. They need to feel justified to feel saved and successful. Instead of pursuing salvation directly, they pursue justification directly as a substitute for salvation. People need to feel they are basically correct, not guilty, their lives matter, and they 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 can lead to unusually great and widespread damage. People who go on crusades to feel justified to feel saved do great damage. People tempt their fellow sectarians with justification-for-salvation so that they can gang up to hurt other people and feel good about it. 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. People use justification-for-salvation as a way to hurt the poor. The poor use crusading for justification as a way to get benefits from the state and to get other people to feel guilty so they can control other people. Oppressed minorities in America use crusades of justification to make other groups feel guilty and to control other groups.

Seeking justification directly is an abuse. Jesus did not want us to be active so we could feel justified about ourselves. He wanted us to be active to build the Kingdom of God, to build a better world. The teachings of Jesus are not about justification. When seeking justification gets in the way of the teachings of Jesus or of 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 think hard 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 pick 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. Good is good because it is good, not because it justifies you and gets you into heaven.

Judaism and Islam use the idea of justification much as does Christianity, and so have similar problems. If believers in religions other than Judaism-Christianity-and-Islam use the highest goals of their religion as Judaism-Christianity-Islam use justification, they will see that they have similar problems. If you crusade for the right Dharma, your crusade makes you blind, and you hurt other people, then you are wrong, and you have not achieved the right Dharma or the fruits of right Dharma.

Miracles Prove Nothing Important.

Believers think citing miracles by their leader proves that their religion is real, of the one true God, correct, and most correct. Almost no miracles have actually happened. Even if miracles have happened, they prove nothing. If we allow that adepts in one religion (Buddha, Jesus, Moses, or Mohammad) performed miracles, then, by the same standards, we have to allow that adepts in all religions performed miracles. No one religion can claim a monopoly on miracles. The miracles in any one religion cannot be proof that it is true, truest, or best.

More importantly, miracles don't bear on the content of a religion. If adepts in a religion perform miracles but then tell us we have to murder our children and our neighbors, we cannot follow that religion. If the believers in a religion offer no miracles but instead offer the moral teachings of Jesus, "applies equally", and good citizenship, we have to consider the ideas of that religion even if we do not accept its gods.

If we reject miracles as validations of any religion, then we have to judge the principles of that religion by standards that are relevant to basic principles. We do not judge the teachings of any religion according to any miracles. Miracles are irrelevant even if they are clearly true or false.

Buddhists use stories of the young Buddha to convey ideas. In one story, to show that we ought to venerate and follow him, the Buddha walks and talks at birth. If true, would that validate his teaching? If not true, would that invalidate his teaching? If Jesus really was resurrected, does that mean we all have to give up alcohol and sex? If Jesus was not resurrected, does that mean we all have to be gay and marry another homosexual? If Jesus said we have to hate our parents to follow him, does that mean we really have to? The miracles of any religion are irrelevant to the truth of its ideas.

Religions differ in some ideas that are hard to decide on the basis of the ideas alone, on the basis of logic and limited human experiences. In theory, Judaism allows polygamy for men only; Islam says a man may have up to four wives while a woman may have at most one husband; and Christianity officially is silent on the topic although in practice it promotes monogamy. Deistic religions make one God quite important while Hinduism and Buddhism accept many gods and do not make any god too important. If we believe that the adepts in one religion performed miracles while the adepts in the other religions did not, then we are likely to take that as evidence that the one religion is true, and we are likely to accept its opinion on ideas such as marriage and gods. If we wish to promote our religion while denigrating alternatives, then we are likely to argue that the miracles in our religion are true and good while the miracles reported in all other religions are false and-or come from the Devil. This is where deciding the truth of miracles might be a bit important, but not much.

We can't use miracles to decide whether to accept the deepest principles such as "do unto others" and "applies equally". We have to decide those principles according to them alone, and we are able to make this decision. So the other questions are not very important; at least they are not very important to me. Once we have the basic principles, we can use them as the basis for arguing about other ideas such as gender equality, polygamy, monogamy, and one god or many. We might not be able to decide once-and-for all but at least we can talk to each other, make sense, and make progress. If we don't have the basic principles, then we will get confused about all other questions, including questions about miracles in any religion and about what the truth or falsity of miracles proves.

People argue about miracles as a way to promote their religion, denigrate other religions, and denigrate all religion. I think the question of miracles is irrelevant and diverting. If the true underlying wish is to assess particular religions, assess religion in general, or assess atheism, then it is better to focus on that task and to forget about miracles. Identify the ideas of the religion and of atheism. Assess if those ideas are reasonable, are reasonable on the basis of circumstantial evidence, are moral, useful, in accord with the right aspects of human nature, do not go against important aspects of human nature such as the desire to be moral and to believe in some spirit, and do not contradict science. That focus is much more relevant than miracles.

Religion and Morality as Weapons.

See the chapter on human nature. See above and below. Using morality and religion as weapons is wrong, even when the morality and religion are right, except for special cases.

PART 3: Logical Errors.

Not Everything from Nothing.

We can derive any silliness at all from nonsense, yet many religious dogmas seem like nonsense, and thus religious dogmas allow believers to claim anything as a result. We have to be careful. If the next two paragraphs annoy you, skip them, but stay in the section to read what follows 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 shows us how whole systems work and directs our attention to problems and holes. I do not show how.

It is easy to see this peculiarity where the “if” statement is clearly false. We can do this by putting together two contradictory statements to make up the one statement in the “if” part: “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. This is just strange, and seems like justifying nonsense with emptiness.

Now resume the section. When most people hear an “if” that cannot reasonably be evaluated or is likely to be false, they just shrug off the “then” part: “If the sun turns green, then I will win the lottery”. People can see the two statements are not really related.

In religion, though, the connection can get obscure, we think the two parts are related even when they are not, we get anxious, and we get susceptible to manipulation. “If Jesus is God, then everybody who believes will go to heaven just because they believe, and then everybody who does not believe will go to hell just because they do not believe”. 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 the whole if-then statement is true even if Jesus is not God, so it seems we have to accept the “then” parts. It seems that we are going to hell if we are not careful. We can't be sure we won't go to hell if Jesus is not God. So we better accept that Jesus is God so we don't go to Hell. 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 all our conclusions must be true. In that case, we had better be careful what we say and what we accept.

This is why scientists insist that statements can be evaluated as true or false (if a statement can be evaluated as definitely false, that is enough; but we don't need to get into the topic here). Scientists 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 reading the Bible. It is self-contradictory and it says things that cannot be evaluated through experience such as that the earth stood still to help Joshua win a battle. From its self-contradictions and its statements that cannot be evaluated we can derive almost anything we want. We have to be careful about faith and about thinking 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.

It becomes hard to sort out ideas that really merit consideration for faith from nonsense that ideologues can use to get us to believe other nonsense. There are many ways to deal with these situations but I cannot go through them here. To its credit, Buddhism tries to restrict itself to ideas that can be tested against common sense, and it tries not to derive other principles from nonsense or from ideas that cannot be tested against common sense. Buddhism goes astray when it does use ideas that cannot be tested, or that are high-blown and awe-inspiring, such as salvation for everyone.

No Magic Formula.

Now I give you some hopefully 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: we have faith; faith leads to God giving 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.

The State as Our Agent.

People find it natural to use the state to support their religion and morality. This is wrong. It is right to use the state to uphold some generally accepted moral positions, such as “do not kill”. It is wrong to use the state to impose moral positions that we want such as “no abortion” even when we are sure those moral positions are correct and even when we are sure that violating these moral positions hurts people.

Not so long ago, people used the state to make sure everybody went to the right church and 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. 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 the law of the Roman Empire. They did not try to change the behavior of non-Christians. Instead, they went along with the basic rules of the Empire, did among themselves what they thought was right, and tried to change the minds of people who would 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. 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. It is not always easy to draw the lines.

Sometimes another group uses the state to impose its morality. Sometimes that morality hurts us and might even hurt the general welfare. If we really are threatened, 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, this situation arises not nearly as often as people fear. Unfortunately, people invoke this situation to generate fear to get what they want. People use fear to create artificial battlegrounds to get their own way. This is using religion and morality as weapons. Most argument over abortion is more about getting your own way than about protecting innocent babies or preserving freedom of choice. So we have to be 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.

“Say ‘Yes’ to Life”.

Half-true mistakes are especially vexing. Here is one. It goes along with Romanticism. It still shows up when we “say ‘yes’ to life” by “saying yes” to trendy rebellion. It shows up when we say, “we’re gonna have a new attitude”.

In an essay written about 1840, Ralph Waldo Emerson described a secular Transcendentalist ritual in New England in which an upper-middle class woman pledges to “Say ‘Yes’ to Life”. She promises to give up her rigid background and her inhibitions, and to take whatever Life throws at her. In this case, her change in attitude likely meant she should read more literature, especially novels of the Romantic period such as “Frankenstein” by Mary Shelley and works of the Bronte sisters, read new theology such as by Hegel, go to concerts of Romantic music such as by Wagner and Liszt, and hang out with radicals such as Unitarians and Transcendentalists. Of course, along the way, she hoped to find a like-minded mate of the appropriate class and religion. Emerson’s essay was an unintended self-parody. (Despite searching, I have not been able to find the essay again. If you know of it, please tell me.)

Middle class Americans have been making much the same pledge for about two hundred years, although not in such formal ways. Now that rebellion is part of the culture, they simply go along with their culture and use rebellion to make the pledge. The new Romantic music is rock-n-roll, and the new novels are the movies. After World War Two, people who say “Yes” to Life added sex and drugs. Saying “Yes” to Life through sex and drugs now is what high school and college are about. Whether in the Transcendental Emerson form or the modern rock-and-roll form, most people who take the pledge stay middle class and marry other middle class people.

Saying “Yes” to Life in this way is like going directly after Salvation. “Life” is the new Romantic Salvation that replaced the old Christian Justification-for-Salvation. If you have a real “Real Life Encounter”, then you are Justified and Saved. Just as the old ideology of Justification-for-Salvation did not often succeed, so, if you go after Life this new way, you are not likely to find it, and you are likely to do a lot of damage. It is better just to do what you think is important, and true to your character, and to let Life take its course. Life will find you if you do that. You will not have to find it. Don’t dogmatize, just do.

Sometimes it is important to examine our presuppositions, including our inhibitions, and to get rid of bad ones. That is one way we get rid of prejudice. But we don’t have to get rid of all inhibitions, and we don’t have to say “Yes” to Life to do it. We just do it. We need to keep a few good inhibitions. You do not say “Yes” to Life by having sex with everybody and by helping in a murder. You don’t even do it by getting drunk.

Often strong new experiences and strong new people help us to examine ourselves and our world, and to get rid of bad habits. People do hide behind formal ways of life, jobs, homes, churches, etc. Sometimes strong new experiences and new people can help us break out. Sometimes it helps to be receptive to strong new experiences and new people. Travel is fun. You can do all this without making a dogma of it. You can do it much better without making a dogma of it.

This attitude is not all bad. It has produced some good movies, especially in the 1960s and early 1970s, such as “Harold and Maude”, “The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie”, “Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore”, and, later, “How Stella Got Her Groove Back”. A good recent movie on both sides of the question is “Yes Man” starring James Carrey. The movie first satirizes and then re-frames saying “yes” to life in a better way. If you go at “Say Yes” the right way, and realize you are likely to “get back to where you once belonged”, then the attitude of “Say Yes” can be useful.

Worshipping Life and Nature.

These attitudes toward nature differ: use, appreciate, revere, conserve, preserve, and worship. I don’t sort out how they differ. Revering nature highly is the same as worshipping nature. All people must use nature directly or indirectly such as for food and energy; I revere nature; I want to conserve nature without necessarily preserving it in pristine form everywhere; I want to preserve nature in pristine form in some places; and I do not worship nature.

Only some Europeans, and the Americans descended from those Europeans, clearly worship nature. Some Taoists in China, and some Japanese followers of Shinto, might have worshipped nature too but I don’t know enough to say for sure. Most peoples of the world use nature heavily and appreciate nature mildly but do not revere it and are not much concerned with conservation or preservation. They tend to think that European-American nature reverence-and-worship is bizarre.

As far as I can tell, only people who have (or had) unrealistic idealized images of nature worship nature or revere nature to the point of worship. These people might be intimately involved with nature but still they have idealized unrealistic ideas of nature. Usually these people are removed from nature and see it only through the lens of some ideology. The most obvious example today is urban middle class people who

want to preserve all cuddly little animals and every tree ever sprouted. Even people who study nature scientifically often have unrealistic ideas about it and worship it. Some classic European and American naturalists, especially before about 1980, fall into this camp. Virginia Woolf makes fun of worshipping nature, and of the British romantic attitude toward nature, in her funny novel “Orlando”.

The point here is that nature worship is a form of idolatry, no matter how well intended. It is not horribly wrong, and I don’t think God will send you to Hell for it, but it is misguided and wrong enough to cause problems. It gives rise to the idea of LIFE as the spirit of the universe and the companion idea that we should “say ‘yes’ to life”. It mixes with Romanticism so that Life is the Spirit, and we say yes to the Spirit when we say yes to Life.

On a lesser scale, the idea that Life is sacred, generates us, flows through us, and that we are all kin by mother Life, fuels the modern environmental movement. This is a lesson in the other direction. Modern environmental advocates are wrong about Life and Nature but, coming from the wrong reasons, they are right about the need to take care of the planet, to conserve nature, and to find ways for nature and people to get along. This is approximately the philosophy of well-informed realistic members of the World Wildlife Fund. It is possible to have good outcomes from bad premises. Given the choice between misguided but useful preservation of worshipped nature versus “use nature till we all live in a crap pool” I go along with misguided but useful.

Nature worship also gives rise to silly ideas about natural medicine, natural cures, living naturally, natural food, organic food, etc. I can’t debunk all that here, and it is done well by other people. As I pointed out in the chapter on the evolution of human nature, not everything in nature is good, not everything good comes solely from nature, some things in nature are bad, and sometimes we have to choose. Too much of some kinds of herbal tea don’t cure cancer and they can kill you.

It is not hard to get a better idea of nature, and of relations between people and nature, if you will read a little and to watch some good TV. I do not offer a list of readings. PBS, Animal Planet, the Discovery Channel, and the National Geographic channel all offer good nature shows that are much more realistic and accurate than when I was young.

The Unbearable Joy of Infinite Happiness and Infinite Life.

Believers in theistic religions are blessed with potential heaven but cursed with fear of hell and the need to justify themselves. Believers in religions that feature a joyous system of many lives do not have those worries but they do have other burdens to go along with the benefits. If you believe you are part of a great joyous system of many lives, you can tap into that system, and you should tap into that system, then you should already have tapped into it, and you should be really happy. In fact, the people I have met who believe this seem miserable. Happiness is a duty. They try hard to be happy. They pretend they are happy. They try to make other people happy. You used to see the face of strained happiness in the “Hare Krishna” and “Transcendental Meditation” people. Some Christians who say they are sure of heaven have the same strained tired face too. When happiness is a necessity, it becomes a duty, and then it becomes its opposite, a kind of misery.

Just as we are morally mixed beings, so also we are rarely perfectly happy. Normal life is not happy. It might be filled with wonder and might feature opportunities, but it also has many sorrows. The sorrows are not usually another hidden source of joy. They are just sorrows. I have found that people are happier when they don't have to pretend to be happy. A religion that tells you that you have to be blissful makes a mistake. I think this is a mistake of Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, and some Christianity.

Mahayana and Hinduism also promise Infinite Life through a system of many lives, to go along with the Infinite Joy. Infinite Life would not be tolerable without Infinite Joy. Any religion that offers Infinite Life also has to offer Infinite Joy, and both offers are mistakes. Infinite Life compounds the mistake of Infinite Joy, and together they are much worse than each alone.

Some very few people do seem to tap into a lot of joy. In my experience, these people are not confined to any one religion, and only a small proportion of them are also mystics. Some say they find joy because of their religion, and I am happy to accept their explanation, but I suspect they use religion to explain joy that comes despite religion. If you feel joy like this, then go with it. If you are lucky enough to know somebody like this, then borrow some of his-her joy. But don't feel guilty because you are not like this if you are not like this.

Devil Worship.

Idolatry is bad worship. We have no problem saying that a person worships money and holds it as an idol when money is all he-she thinks about and when he-she blames all problems on the lack of money or on money in the wrong places. We say some people worship their work or make an idol of their job. Right wingers say nature lovers make an idol of nature; nature lovers are obsessed and so worship an idol. In the 1950s, Americans feared Communists, saw them everywhere, blamed all the problems of the world on them, fought them, encouraged others to fight them, believed you had to be against them or for them, and hounded people who did not fight them. It is no exaggeration to say they worshipped communists as bad idols. To hate something that is like a god is to worship that thing just as much as to love something like a god is to worship.

What if a person feared a spirit, saw the spirit everywhere, blamed the spirit for the problems of the world, fought the spirit, and encouraged everybody else to fight the spirit? What if the person was more worried about fighting that spirit than about doing good and following God? That person worships the spirit in a bad way; that person holds the spirit as in idol. If we can say this of people who worship money, nature, or Communism, we can say if of people who worship a spirit through fear of the spirit. That person holds the bad spirit above God and worships the bad spirit above God. Unfortunately, that is what I have seen among too many Christians and Muslims. They are far more concerned with fighting the bad work of the devil than doing the good work of God. Their concern does not make them better servants of God. Their dedication makes them worshippers of the Devil, even if the Devil does not exist. The religion of fighting the Devil is not necessarily the religion of worshipping God. If you are more concerned about the Devil than about God then you worship the Devil even as you fight the Devil.

I do not believe in the Devil and I do not believe evil comes from the Devil. If you believe in the Devil and you want to fight evil, there are better ways than to focus entirely on the Devil. Find the root causes of

evil in the material and social worlds. Find solutions that succeed without causing more harm than good. Fight to end the causes of evil. Fight to carry out the useful solutions.

Unity of Opposites.

Just as some ideologies are dangerous because half-true, so also some logic is dangerous because it is half-true. Most of the logical alternatives that came out of the “dialectic” are like this. Here I describe only one, a variation that is important in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

The line between love and hate is thin, and one turns into the other. Fear easily turns into rage and hate. Respect is tinged with fear, anger, and resentment. The line between creativity and madness blurs. Madness undoes creativity while creativity can undo madness. Straight-line strength is easily vulnerable to being diverted and undermined. Soft water, rushing over the great rock of a continent, ultimately wears down a continent. Dissolved rock settles out of the bottom of water to become rock again. Tranquility often comes only after great exertion. The search for salvation often leads to great spiritual distress, and sometimes to damnation. When we let go of direct search for salvation, we find it. Yin becomes yang, and vice versa.

All these examples are true enough. In the hands of a good storyteller, they could serve as the basis for engaging tales. But the unity of opposites is not always true, and it is not something we should depend on. Love does not always turn into hate. Hate usually does not turn into love. A rock can divert water for a long time before it is dissolved. Most fast straight punches are not diverted, and an un-diverted punch breaks the snout. Salvation is not always deception. What is new now does turn into boredom later but what is boring now does not always give rise to what is new and interesting later. Not all spiritual revivals work. Capitalism does not necessarily contain its own destruction, nor does Communism. The religion of love, Christianity, does not necessarily turn into the religion of class-based oppression and pedophile abusive priests; sometimes it remains the religion that gets neighbor to help neighbor; and usually priests are really good folk.

Take ideas as they come. Use them as far as they are useful. Don't get lost in them as dogmas. If it is useful to think in terms of yin and yang for a problem, then do it. Don't expect to be able to resolve all issues in terms on one thought method. You can't resolve all issues in terms of the unity of opposites, the dialectic, or yin and yang, and more than you can with rigid binary algorithms.

No Magical Energy.

This line from Dylan Thomas is worth repeating. Here, a “fuse” is a flower bulb.

“The Force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives me”

The ideas in this section are related to the ideas of spiritual force and “mana” described in the chapter on common religious ideas but I do not point out the similarities.

Most religions have an idea of a spiritual energy that drives things. In Judaism, it is the Shekinah. In Christianity, it is the Holy Spirit, one-third of the Christian Trinity. Islam has a similar idea but I am not sure what it is called formally; usually it is part of the idea of the Will of God, a force that causes things to be automatically. I am not sure of relations between all these ideas in the Judaic tradition. Buddhists and Hindus endow the idea of Dharma with a similar force. In addition, Hindus recognize other forces, such as “shakti” energy; the energy that comes from meditation (“tapas” or “heat”); “prana” or “breath energy”; energy from sounds (the notorious “OM” or “AUM”); maybe energy from visual patterns (“mandala”); and the energy of creation that comes from Brahma. Buddhism has ideas similar to Hinduism. Taoism has the Tao, chi, yin and yang, and virtue. Confucianism has Heaven, chi, yin and yang, and virtue.

In most religions, a person can live in accord with the spiritual energy and-or can “tap into” the spiritual energy. Doing so usually leads to a better life. If a lot of people do it, it leads to a better society. The spiritual energy can select a person, guide a person, help a person, heal a person, and make a person stronger, smarter, and more effective. The spiritual energy can also cause damage if mishandled.

I once took a yoga course in college. The teacher was a good guy. He said yoga was based on a great spiritual energy. The energy to which yoga led was much stronger even than atomic energy. If it could be harnessed for good, it would save the world.

None of this is true, at least not in the way that religions think of it. There is no magical energy. There is only the normal energy and matter of physics, in various arrangements. We feel magical energy because of the lively minds that we evolved and because the physical world can form beautiful intricate compelling patterns. To think in terms of magical energy is a handy, and often correct-enough, way to think of the world, especially the living world and the human social world. That is all, but it is a lot.

Imagine a set of Tinker Toys. You can put together the same pieces a lot of ways. How you put them together is not inherent in the pieces. How you put them together is the energy behind the world that you make out of the toys when you put them together in a particular way. Any particular toy piece does a lot better if it does not try to be a “square peg in a round hole” but instead goes along with the image that the builder (you) has in mind. That is the energy of the living world and the social world. The world is made up of energy and matter but the energy and matter are not random. They come in patterns. We can see the patterns. We do a lot better if we go along with the patterns. If we go against the patterns, we can get all the benefits that religious believers say that we can get from magical energy. If we go against the patterns, we get hurt. We can get a lot of energy from the sun. We can also get sunburned. We can get a lot of energy and many interesting chemicals from fossil fuels. We can also waste them and poison the planet.

Physicists, chemists, and biologists have found beautiful patterns in some of the following. Without knowing the science, it is tempting to think of these as examples of “life force” or a similar great energy. Knowing the science does not diminish the allure of these patterns and how useful it is to fall in with them rather than oppose them. The list: the coordination of fireflies, the coordination of croaking frogs, the rotation of black holes, how a centipede moves its legs, how the heart beats and how beats can get out of synchrony, how animals move in groups, there are only a limited number (17) of ways to draw two-dimensional patterns, there are only a limited number of ways a three-dimensional crystal can form, the

patterns that form in whirling water, the fact that patterns in what otherwise appears to be chaos double (or triple, or quadruple, etc.) at a very regular interval (Feigenbaum's number), etc.

Early Greek thinkers felt that a mind lay behind the world. This is the same feeling as the idea that a spiritual energy lays behind the world. This is how I think of spiritual energy, and not only because I am Greek. It is a handy way to think, and the mind of God certainly does lay behind the world. But until I know the mind of God, it is only a handy way to think.

To deny there is an autonomous all-purpose spiritual energy is not to deny that there is a kind of energy in many things that we can feel and can tap into. Sporting games, such as football, have momentum ("the big 'MO'") which many people can feel and smart players can tap into. So do political campaigns, networks of people, rock concerts, and even social parties. I have already mentioned the Sun. Even Black Holes have a kind of energy, especially the monster Black Holes at the center of galaxies, and we might someday be able to use that.

I am not sure where this limited sense of spiritual energy leaves ideas such as Dharma, Tao, Heaven, Goodness, Virtue, Tapas, Chi, Yin and Yang, etc. Except in some limited ways with yin and yang in the martial arts, I have not found it useful to think in those terms. I do not even find it useful to think in those terms when I feel what other people might call "chi" in martial arts or "tapas" in meditation. If you do feel any of these, and you do no harm, then I doubt there is anything wrong with going along with the feeling as long as you do not think your felt energy is the ultimate force behind the universe and you do not think everybody has to think exactly as you think.

Christianity in theory allows forgiveness for any sin except a deliberate malicious sin against the Holy Spirit. I am not sure if what I say here denies the Holy Spirit and so commits a heinous sin against the Holy Spirit. I leave this issue up to theologians and, once again, I rest confident in God sorting it out for me someday and in God's mercy.

Dharma.

Holding to the idea of Dharma is not usually a mistake but it is useful here to say a few words to clear up possible issues. Most Westerners are unclear about Dharma. I am not much clearer. Even Hindus and Buddhists that I have met are not always clear and they are not consistent within themselves individually, between individuals, and between schools and religions.

Originally Dharma likely meant something like "ritual efficacy". If you did things according to the ritual relevant to a situation, then the result should come out fine. The result would come out fine because the ritual went along with the order of the world and manipulated the order. It was like spiritual engineering or spiritual gardening. (The idea of Dharma is more refined than "white magic" but I cannot here go into how the two ideas differ.)

From that, Dharma came to mean the order of the world itself, in particular the moral, social, and spiritual order of the world, even apart from humans and gods. Dharma came to mean duty. It came to describe the place of people in the world and society, and the duty of people to carry out their place for the sake of the whole. It came to have a sense similar to "the mind behind it all", or "nous", in Greek philosophy. All

along, the idea of Dharma carried a sense of the rules of the world and how the world works according to its rules, something like natural law in Western science, but including moral rules such as just reward for good and bad deeds (karma). Dharma further came to mean the ideas, doctrines, dogmas, ideologies, and mystic visions of schools, sects, and religions. The ideas of Buddhism are its Dharma(s); and the working of the world according to Buddhism is Dharma; because Buddhism is the one true religion, the ideas of Buddhism are the same as the working of the world. The same is true of Hinduism.

To the extent Dharma coincides with intellectual and scientific understanding of the world, then use of the idea of Dharma is fine. The two are the same. The Dharma of weather is the same as the scientific analysis of weather. The Dharma of jazz is the same as the artistic feel for jazz. The Dharma of realistic socially conscious fiction is the same as the sense for realistic socially conscious fiction. Intellectual and scientific understanding of the world includes ideas such as “what goes round come round”, the evolution of cooperation, the evolution of morality, the likely pervasiveness of morality in evolved beings around the universe, natural cycles, and everything else that makes modern science so much fun. To the extent Dharma recognizes that morality exists, morality is a big part of the lives of evolved sentient beings, and morality governs many of the results to actions by sentient beings, that is fine too. To the extent Dharma recognizes patterns in the world and accepts that patterns run according to the laws of the world, such as stellar (solar) systems, galaxies, DNA, political campaigns, etc, than is fine. Thinking in terms of Dharma can be useful. Using the analyses of Dharma recorded in Buddhist and Hindu texts can be useful as long as the analyses fit situations better than alternatives and do not shut off our minds to better alternatives later. Hindu and Buddhist texts can be wonderful sources of suggestions.

If Dharma insists on more, then I disagree. There is no Dharma more than physical laws; energy and matter; the patterns formed through energy, matter, and physical laws; and the morality that emerges in the evolution of sentient beings. The only thing behind all this is God or the Mind of God. If Dharma is the same as God and-or the mind of God, then I want to see God and-or the mind of God in my terms. I admit this is selfish and narrow-minded of me, but I can do no better.

Besides the idea that Dharma explains the physical world and people’s place in it, Dharma was extended to social life, particular societies, the place of people in societies, and relations between people. Dharma was used to rationalize things as they are (the “status quo”) including inequality, exploitation, oppression, great wealth along with great poverty, gender relations, the superiority of men, the inferiority of women, and socio-economic class. If your father was a carpenter, you should be a carpenter. If your father was a great Rajah with untold wealth, likely you deserved the same as long as you had not done something in a past life to merit losing it. Indian society was as it was because that was the Dharma of India and Indians. Chinese society was as it was because that was the Dharma of China and Chinese.

The idea of social Dharma also taught mutual obligation and, sometimes, mutual support. If you were a Rajah, then you were obliged to govern your people well for the mutual and greater benefit of all. You could not simply milk your people for your own indulgence. If you were a soldier, you should carry out your duties and your job, just as Krishna advised Arjuna. If you were a doctor, you should heal almost everybody. If you were a priest, you should carry out the proper rituals for various people according to their social station and needs. If you were a husband, you should be a good man, father, and husband. If you were a wife, you should be a good woman, mother, and wife. In this regard, the idea of Dharma

was similar to the idea of social relations under Feudalism in Europe. It is similar to the idea of how social life works, or should work, held by many anthropologists.

This view of society and Dharma is charming and appealing. When everything goes well, people have a lot of freedom, people can change roles sometimes, and people can do what they want sometimes, it is not far off what people imagine of a good society. But that is not how it works out in practice. In real life, it more often seems to rationalize disparity, oppression, and exploitation than mutual support. It blocks freedom, change in role, and doing what you want. It gives people duties that they are unable to carry out well, such as people born to govern who cannot govern, and thus hurts society. It blocks people of ability rising to positions of responsibility and power. It traps men and women in stereotyped gender and parental roles.

When Dharma is extended to society, it is as if complete continuity holds between nature and society. Human society is simply part of nature. When a human society is stratified, filled with rich and poor, high and low, oppressed and oppressor, standard men and standard women, that is because that society is naturally that way as part of Dharma. While the abilities that people use to build societies evolved and so are natural, we should not view all societies as natural and inevitable. With the same abilities, people can make vastly different kinds of societies, just as with the same steel people can make vastly different kinds of buildings, boats, and cars. However much people came out of nature, and are governed by physical laws, what we do with our heritage should not be viewed as natural and so as inevitable and good. We should judge what we do in our societies by the best moral principles, and we should not simply take what is in our societies for granted as natural, inevitable, and good. The idea of Dharma blocks us from seeing how human action builds society and can rebuild society. The idea of Dharma blocks us from assessing societies according to the best moral principles. In this regard, the Dharma view of society is false and wrong, and I disagree with it. I get along better with the ideas of nature, physics, biology, evolution, social evolution, and history.

Likely the same comments apply to the Tao, Virtue, and Heaven; for which see the chapters on Taoism and Confucianism.