

21 Legalism, Exclusivity, and Fundamentalism

If religion only reinforced common life, then religion would not be needed, and nobody would commit to it. You would be better off making friends or buying insurance. Religion has to be a bit at odds with normal life; and religion has to be a bit crazy. By acting a bit crazy, sometimes people succeed better than if they act only rationally. Yet if religion is too crazy, it hurts normal life, erodes comparative success, and then people stop believing. Religion has to justify our search for success and it has to reinforce common life. Religion has to find a balance between slightly unworldly but still relevant. It has to be crazy enough so people can use it to form solid groups, commit, avoid domination, manipulate others, and dominate others, but it has to be not so crazy that its own believers fear it, are open to abuse from within, open to abuse from without, and suffer in competition. Legalism, exclusivity, and fundamentalism are three ways to find that balance. The ideas in this chapter likely have clear roots in our evolved nature but I do not go into the subject. I use “god” instead of “God” because I use ideas that are common to many stances, not only to those stances who believe in God as I do.

PART 1: God, the Good Life, and the Bad Life.

The Ideas of Believers about god, the Good Life, and the Bad Life.

A common idea in most religions is that following the religion leads to the Good Life for individuals and for the community. In theistic religions, the idea is that following the will of god leads to the Good Life. Going against the will of god hurts both individuals and the community.

The will of god can be expressed in a written text, formal edicts such as the Ten Commandments or the Jewish Law, rules, the sayings of prophets and teachers, and the stories of prophets and teachers. For this chapter, I use “commands” and “will of god” to mean any of those ways.

“The Good Life” did not necessarily mean the most materially prosperous life although usually it did mean that. Usually people who followed the commands of god thought doing so would lead both to individual prosperity and community welfare. They would have successful families. They could control bad people. Their nation would have freedom from domination and would dominate enemy nations. The rain would fall gently, steadily, on time, and just enough. The wind would blow only gently. On the other hand, disobeying god would lead to personal failure, community hardship, strife, national defeat, poverty, flood, drought, storm, and natural disaster.

If necessary, god would actively intervene to insure these results. God would reward the group as a whole or collectively punish the group as a whole. God rewarded by giving material prosperity, security, national power, and by averting disasters. God punished through natural and manmade disasters such as plague, famine, and defeat in war. God punished by making sure the economy floundered.

Usually, though, god did not have to actively intervene. In modern terms, god’s commands go along with nature, human nature, human social life as a result of human nature, and the dominant economic system

such as capitalism. God tells us to do what we should do according to nature etc. anyway. When we act according to god's commands, we act according to nature. When we act according to nature, then things turn out best. God's commands are a plan for living, a plan that accords with nature, human nature etc., so following god's plan is bound to work out best.

People who said that following god leads to the Good Life did not expect the Good Life for everybody equally. Some bad people would not share in the Good Life while some especially good people might be rewarded more than average. Of course, the apparent unfairness of the world would go on as before, so some good people would not get their seemingly just share of goodness while some bad people would still prosper. This seeming imperfection does not invalidate the basic idea that following god leads to the Good Life. In the same way, even when people did not follow god, and god punished them for doing so, the punishment would not fall equally or fairly. The fact that the punishment did not fall equally or fairly did not invalidate the basic idea.

People who said that following god leads to the Good Life did not expect that the Good Life would be as good as could be imagined. Other nations might still be better off. It is only necessary that our Good Life be better than otherwise. In the same way, punishment need not be as bad as could be imagined. Life need only be worse than otherwise. Other nations might be worse off but that does not mean god is not punishing us for acting badly. Burma might be worse off than America but that does not mean god is not punishing America.

Even when the group (country) as a whole does not follow god, people within the group still can follow god and still can expect to be rewarded with a Good Life. Even when the group as a whole follows god, some people in the group do not follow god. Sometimes they obviously suffer as when violent criminals and their families suffer violence. Sometimes they do not suffer obviously yet they suffer in that the quality of their lives is poor, as when rich people are miserable. If those punishments are not enough, eventually god will punish them in other ways such as by taking away their power and wealth or by sending them to hell.

Even when following god does not lead to the Good Life in any obvious material or political ways, it is still the Good Life. There is intrinsic satisfaction in doing what god wants, following gods' morality, and in going along with human nature and general nature as god thinks of them. This satisfaction is much more rewarding than mere prosperity or power. Usually satisfaction in going along with god also comes with a feeling of security in family life that cannot be achieved through mere prosperity or power. A godly family is a happy family even if they eat stewed cabbage every night. In the same way, going against god destroys the Good Life even when, by external standards, people are prosperous and powerful. We feel bad when we go against god, morality, human nature, and general nature. Our families argue even if our children grow rich. We are dysfunctional in a bad way. It is good to follow god and get the Good Life.

What about commands that seem to have little to do with nature such as the command not to eat pork? In the context in which the command was given originally, to Hebrew nomads, the command would not have caused much hardship, and would have helped in their way of life. I can't explain more here. Most commands that seem at odds with nature are like that. Usually they are not much of a hardship, might make practical sense in ways we don't appreciate now, and, importantly, they help reinforce a feeling of group solidarity and they lead to more cooperation. That in turn leads to more success.

What about commands that seemingly go against nature such as Jesus' command to leave father and mother to follow him, or even to hate father and mother so as to follow him? Most believers feel they can ignore or modify such commands without much danger. Usually there are alternative ways to fulfill the goals of the command. In this case, a person can follow Jesus without hating his father and mother by giving time, energy, and money.

Nature did come from god and so mostly nature goes along with god. But nature is not the same all over and nature is not the same all the time even in one place. People have to adjust. God commands us as a way to fine-tune our adjustment. Even though nature came mostly from god, nature is not always good. Our human nature is not always good. Moral good is more important to god than nature. God commands us so we do what is good even if we are naturally tempted to steal, seduce our neighbors, or kill them. God commands us so as to fine-tune our nature to morality. God guides us in how to run our families and our relations with other people.

In modern times, the most obvious candidates in America for this attitude about god and the Good Life are Right-Wing Religious-Right Family-Values Republicans. They have an idea of what is natural, human nature, business natural, and commanded by God for people in accord with God's ideas of nature, human nature, and society.

Yet Religious Right Republicans are not the only people who think in these terms. In our times, people substitute the policies of their political group for the commands of god. People think they can achieve the Good Life if they, and the country, would only follow the policies of Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, Communists, Political Correctness, or Tea Party. They believe this even when they do not understand nature, human nature, or the policies, have no idea where the policies really come from, if the policies really address the issues they appear to, and if side effects are worse than the problems the policies are supposed to address. There is a Good Life. Our party knows the Good Life. The policies of our party will lead us to the Good Life. Our party is the proxy for god. Our party is god on Earth.

My Assessment.

I doubt much of this is true, at least not in the way most believers believe it. God does not intervene to make it true. God does not collectively reward and punish so as to guide groups to follow his commands. Even if God did do that with Hebrews, Israelites, and Jews a long time ago, and even if God did do that with Muslims long ago, he does not do that now with any group, not modern Israel, Islam, and even America. God did not reward America with power and prosperity because America was godlier and was the new Israel. God did not punish America with recession, war, Democrats, and Republicans because America was lax about oppressing homosexuals or because America elected Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush the son. After tornadoes in Tuscaloosa, AL in 2012, preachers in Alabama really did say God was punishing Tuscaloosa for something; I don't remember what. They were wrong. God will not lift up Muslims to power again if they pray five times a day, stick their hands up when they do pray, keep women veiled, keep girls out of school, and spit during Ramadan.

The truest version of this idea that god rewards good behavior is the one in which we derive satisfaction from doing what is right and from mostly following nature.

Leave aside problems with group versus group, subgroups, and cheaters. As a matter of fact and human evolutionary history, these things usually coincide well enough: nature, morality, human nature, making a living, family life, and self-interest. Any commands of god that went along with those forces would mostly work, and would mostly lead to a good life. This good life would be close enough to the imagined Good Life. Our group would automatically reap the rewards of good religious action. On the other hand, if we act against those forces then we suffer. If many people in our group act contrarily, then our group suffers. We automatically get punished both individually and collectively. When we follow the commands of god, we all lead a Good Life because that is how the world was set up. When we break the commands of god, we all suffer because that is how the world was set up. If we were all more astute, and had never evolved a capacity for religion, we would not need to refer to the commands of God. We would just see the links between situation, behavior, and results. But we are not astute enough, and we did evolve religion. So we do refer to the commands of god for those behaviors that lead us to do well anyway and to explain when we do badly.

This result does not mean God did not plan it this way or did plan it this way. I think he did. This result only means that the world and God do not work quite the way that believers believe.

Nature is not the same everywhere and all the time. Nature changes. We are largely in tune with nature but not exactly in tune. Nature is largely in tune with morality but not exactly in tune. That is one reason why god commanded us, so that we could be in tune with nature as we find it here and now. This logic seems a big part of the argument of “family values” believers and religious conservatives everywhere.

So, not all of god’s commands could be absolutely true for all people, cultures, and societies in all times and at all places. Situations change, god wants the Good Life for us in all situations, and so some commands have to be relative to situations. God’s commands can change. He can add new commands, change old commands, and rescind old commands. Commands have to be re-interpreted. All this is what god did with his prophets. This is how Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish history developed. This is what Christians say god did with Judaism and what Muslims say god did with Judaism and Christianity.

The idea that not all of god’s commands are forever everywhere absolutely true, but some might be relative to situations, makes strong believers quite unhappy. It is easy to subvert relative commands. Relative commands do not provide the framework that people need to get along with each other, get along in the world, and manage their relations with other groups of people. Even if, in their hearts, strong believers know that not all commands apply all the time, they still don’t like to admit it.

The usual response to the relativity of some commands is to prioritize and select. This process can be done openly and honestly for general morality and general benefit or it can be done in the dark for self benefit. Openly prioritize commands so that some commands are absolute while also accepting that some commands are relative to situations. Hope you can derive the application of relative commands in particular situations from the basic commands, as when we derive the command to help disaster victims from the commands for “Do unto others” and social justice. Or, on the other hand, pretend all commands are absolute. Sneakily prioritize in fact some commands as important while neglecting the status of other commands in fact. Select as important the commands that are most useful for us. In practice, neglect commands that are difficult even when, in theory, we say they are equally important.

The intellectual, rational, logical, good version of this process is to select the commands that are most general and most moral to serve as the absolute commands, and then to make other commands relative to those basic principles. That is what I have tried to do in this book. By taking “applies equally” and the Golden Rule as basic, we can make sense of various other commands in particular situations.

In my experience, most believers follow the guideline of reasonableness a little bit but not consistently. It is too tempting to select commands that work for the group right now as absolute while ignoring difficult commands. It is too easy to select as absolute the commands that serve as tools in inter-group conflict while neglecting other commands that require us to bridge differences. Part of the task of this chapter is to illustrate this kind of selection.

More on Relative and Absolute.

It is worth returning briefly to the relativity of commands.

Strong believers cannot have it all ways. They cannot both believe that all god's commands are always everywhere absolutely true and still believe in history and still think nature and god go along well.

If some commands were not relative, there would be no Israelite, Christian, or Muslim history, at the least. If all God's commands were given once-and-for-all-forever, they would have been given at the dawn of people, and would not have needed to be unfolded during the course of Hebrew, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim history. There would be no history. There would be no difference between the Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, New Testament and Koran. People would not need to interpret any scripture. For American Christians who believe god's spirit was behind the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and that those documents represent something new in history, then new commands have to arise, and have to put old commands in a new light.

If nature was completely good, nature was always everywhere the same, nature went along entirely with god's commands, and god's commands went along entirely with nature, there would be no need for god's commands. People could just see clearly that the American nuclear family was the right godly natural way to live for everybody everywhere all the time, and people would not need god to command them. It would be like drinking water or breathing air. If god needs to advise us what to do, then nature cannot be obvious and all good all the time everywhere. Nature is not constant, nature is not all good, human nature is not all good, and we do not simply see the best godly way to live. The Golden Calf is more natural than ethical monotheism. The best way to live varies by time and place. In some places, it works better to live in large multi-generation households. In some places, it is better to stay put while in others it is better to wander. In some places, it works better to have many children while in others to have few. In some places, it is better if one child takes in parents when they are old while in other places it is better if old people live in apartments. I leave aside issues such as gay adoption. We don't need to look at those issues to see we need advice, and the fact that we need advice means natural is not always what we should do.

If god needs to advise us about the best way to live, then god's advice changes with situations. God's commands change. If god's commands do not change, then nature cannot change. If nature cannot

change then god's commands are unnecessary. If nature changes, then god's commands change. If god has to give us advice, then god's advice has to change sometimes. If god's advice changes, then nature cannot always be obvious and cannot always be the same. I believe god anticipated this result when he planned the world. I believe it is a lesson about using our heads.

The first Hebrew religion was not ethical monotheism as Jews have now. Hebrews-Israelites-Jews went through at least six phases of religion before they got to what is now modern Rabbinic Jewish religion, and I do not even include phases of Talmudic Judaism as separate steps. The first two phases coexisted among the early Hebrews; the two phases included, first, Yahweh as a storm-warrior god and. Second, El (Elohim) as a local agricultural and state god with a family, children, and siblings or counselors, much like the other Baal of the Semitic neighbors of the Hebrews. After the Hebrews arrived in the (Promised) land that would be Israel, the two gods began merging, excluding other gods, and becoming ethical. I don't go through the steps. Christianity and Islam can be seen as more steps along the same trajectory, or steps down side paths spawned by the original trajectory. God's commands changed according to the stage of Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish religion. God's commands changed along with the various stages of Christian or Muslim history whether Christians and Muslims believe it or not.

The relativity of some commands does not destroy the idea that there are some deep widespread (likely) absolute ideas about how to live. The idea of relativity is threatening only if people refuse to deal with it openly. For people who wish to manipulate commands so as to control other people, the idea of relativity is threatening, and dealing with it openly is threatening. Again, the best response is to figure out openly what is basic, and to see openly what is relative in the light of what is basic.

Selecting, Prioritizing, and Interpreting.

It is not possible to accept literally every rule of any sacred text, not the Tanakh, New Testament, Koran, Hadith, Talmud, Buddhist sutras, sutras and shastras of India, Code of Mani, Tao Te Ching, sayings of Confucius, or writings of Mencius. People who cite the commands of god from any sacred texts select, prioritize, and interpret for their own ends, often good ends, but sometimes bad.

God's Will Again.

Allow me to divide up god's commands like this:

- (1) Key, central, unchanging commands such as the Golden Rule and "applies equally".
- (2) Further related commands about how to live and what to do such as "work hard to make the world better", "be decent", "be useful", "love your neighbor", "forgive a lot", and "enjoy the world".
- (3) Important commands that we can deduce from the above such as, in a democracy, all mentally competent adults with genuine knowledge and experience get to vote, including women, men, gay people, old people, people of all races, and people of all creeds.
- (4) Commands that regulated life in particular circumstances in the past and that still are important today such as "keep the Sabbath", "take care of nature", and "be kind to animals".

(5) Commands that helped groups cohere in the past and that can still be useful today for particular groups such as, for Jews and Muslims, the dietary laws and the laws about prayer. For Muslims, this includes going to Mecca if at all possible, a charming and beneficial idea.

(6) Commands that might have been important in the past but don't make much sense now, and which I don't intend to follow, such as regular ritual sacrifice of animals.

In addition to these commands,

(A) Groups often give their customs the status of god's commands even if the customs were not commanded by god, such as going, for Christians, going to church, and, for Jews and Muslims, wearing certain kinds of clothes and praying certain ways.

(B) Some of the customs with the status of commands are innocuous or useful, such as Christmas.

(C) Some of the customs with the status of commands might have started out with good intentions, and might have had good effects, but can be harmful. When women were denied the right to vote, people took their lack of voting as the status of a command of god based on the duty of men to take care of innocent less-intelligent creatures.

Real life groups mix up all these categories thoroughly. Mixing them up helps make the religion relevant to daily life but transcend daily life at the same time – it gives the religion power. The power helps groups cohere, especially against other groups. The mixing up of categories helps religions present themselves as “systems that eat the world”. Only theologians, philosophers, social scientists, atheists, and people like me are likely to sort the commands and customs out into categories.

The only commands that I take to be really commands of God, and the only ones that are basic, are kinds (1) and (2). These commands are in line with the logic of morality and the best moral principles. The true basic commands of God coincide with the best moral principles.

Atheists can argue that, if the basic commands of God are only those that coincide with the best moral principles, then we don't need to think of commands of God at all. This idea might be strictly true for some commands but it is hardly enough for normal human life, and I have dealt with it in other parts of the book. Besides, this idea is not enough for interpretation and extension of the commands as in cases (3), (4), and (5). There is nothing in logic that compels us to work hard to make the world better but I think it is a command of god and I intend to do what I can. The same is true of “enjoy life”, “be decent”, “forgive”, and so forth.

I do not pay much attention to categories (5), (6), and (B). Americans treat wearing baseball caps and having a smart phone as commands of the culture gods, but I don't care. If the customs help a group to cohere and to be useful, without causing harm, that is fine with me. If group customs are a burden, are hurtful to members, lead members into strife with other groups, lead members of this group to treat that group badly, or contradict moral principles, then I categorically deny that the customs are commands of

God. If your customs are bad, they are not from God, and you should get rid of them. You should stop following them.

It is not always easy to decide on what is a good command or a bad command, especially if a command has a history, and is a close part of group identity. I dislike when adults mutilate the genitals of children. Yet circumcision of boys is an important part of Jewish and Muslim identity, at one time it clearly had the status of a key command of god (although it is not in the Ten Commandments), and I am not comfortable saying Jews and Muslims should stop doing it because I don't like it. I have never been able to make up my mind on this case, and I would not like to pass laws against the practice. On the other hand, some groups in Africa, some African emigrants, groups in the Americas with an African heritage, and some Muslims, mutilate the genitals of girls in order to control their sexuality and their marriages (the mutilation of girls is much worse than male circumcision). This practice is wrong, it is not based on a command of god, it never was a command of god, it should stop, and people who do it should be prosecuted. I do not say this because I like Jews and dislike Muslims.

Most of the rest of this chapter is about how commands of god help groups to maintain cohesion and to carry on satisfying useful ways of life. While describing the good aspects of following the commands of god, I warn against the bad aspects.

PART 2: Legalism

“Legalism” is relying strictly on the rules in a text, without necessarily regarding the spirit (intent or use) behind the rules, and without necessarily regarding how the rules impact personal success in the normal world. (Legalism could be based on a memorized “text” that was not written down but we don't need to consider that case here.) Legalism implies that the text has many rules, and that the rules are specific such as what time of day you may eat lunch, cover many aspects of life, leave few options, and leave little room for individual thought and action. Legalism also implies a caste of people, priests and teachers, who know the law, interpret the law, and judge cases. Whether legalism is good or bad depends.

Rarely is a group always oriented only to the spirit of ideals without regard for coded rules and procedure or only to the letter without regard for the spirit. I can't think of any pure case, not even the American legal profession's obsession with procedure. Groups range from usually focused on ideas to usually focused on rules. It is not possible to have only a feeling for the Good Life without any rules and it is not possible to follow rules with perfect rigidity without any selection or interpretation according to some feeling for what the rules are all about. I do not know if there are “natural nodes” on the continuum. This chapter looks at groups that are on the “strict rule end” of the continuum to see how that stance makes sense.

Just because a group has a text, even a text that supposedly conveys the literal word of God, does not mean the group will adopt legalism. However, having a text, especially a text that claims to convey the literal word of God, does predispose a group toward legalism. Some groups have a legalistic attitude although they do not also have a widely accepted text. Europeans, Americans, and Indians (from India) seem to have a legalistic attitude even when they do not have a text. Having the attitude might dispose a group to adopt a text so that it can have a basis for legalism. Buddhists have many detailed texts but do not seem very legalistic.

Among religions of the world, those which rely on texts to give the absolute unvarying word of God as commandments of law seem among the craziest, yet, paradoxically, seem to be the most successful. The most obvious are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This chapter refers mostly to them. In the past, for those religions, legalism on the whole likely was good but now usually it is not good. Legalism is a surprisingly useful way to find the balance between crazy versus serving self-interest.

Legalism serves people who can control the interpretation of a text because it gives them power. In a social system that is already legalistic, people who want power seek control of interpretation, that is, they seek control of the texts and of the priests-teachers.

Legalism persists for many reasons. People are born into a legalistic tradition, and never get out of it. For most people who live in legalism, living in legalism is actually satisfying. Even in legalism, people can select and interpret from the laws what best serve their needs. The other laws usually are not hard to follow, so the “package deal” is overall quite worthwhile. This seems to be how some Jews approach their holidays, as a satisfying plum to be picked from the overall legal tree. Legalism is one of the many ways in which people bind together into one strong community, especially when faced with opponents. This was a factor in Jewish legalism in the past, and is a factor in Muslim legalism of the present. It is easy to manipulate people with laws. When many laws are available, more tools of manipulation are available. Skillful manipulators pick and interpret laws so that they can control other people. The skillful manipulators stress the entire system of laws so they can use the laws they wish and can keep control.

It is hard to separate the good effects of legalism from the bad effects. In the modern world where we value the pop culture version of personal freedom, we see all legalism as bad. Too often it is bad in the modern world because it resists beneficial changes. Conservatives foster legalism to resist beneficial changes and to keep their own power. For groups that do benefit overall from legalism, I don't have any good advice that hasn't been offered before. For groups that used to benefit from legalism but now likely need to change, I can offer only what has been said in other chapters of the book.

Brief History of Legalism in the Judaic Tradition, with Comments.

Outside of the Middle East, it is not common to have an organized text of specific rules for the conduct of people, society, and the government, handed down by God. Other societies have codes, but usually not as detailed as found in the Middle East, and usually not handed down directly by God. The most famous code inside the Middle East but outside of Israel probably is the Code of Hammurabi from Babylon from 1700 to 1800 BCE. I am not sure what all to make of this fact about texts and the Middle East, but, as a result, ancient Israel did tend toward legalism. I don't know if the presence of codes led ancient Israel to legalism or if a cultural predisposition to legalism led Israel to think of its life in terms of commands directly from God.

Having a set of commands from God by itself probably did not force ancient Israeli to legalism. Legalism needed an amazing series of events to move Israel to legalism. Ancient Israel-as-a-whole was divided into two opposing factions, each with its own priests, military, and claims to rule the entire country: the north (Israel “proper”) and the south (Judea). Eventually the south outlasted the North. To bolster their cases, each faction said its way of life came directly from God through commands. When a disaster

happened, each faction claimed the disaster was punishment from God for disobeying its ideas about what he commanded. Each faction claimed that a good life would return if, and only if, the people and rulers went along with its version of the commands of God.

David and Solomon ruled in Israel around 1000 BCE. Beginning in the 700s BCE, Israel suffered a series of military setbacks that tore the country in two, led to the destruction of the north, and ended with the “Babylonian Captivity” in which tens of thousands of the most skilled Israelites were taken to Babylon for decades. This is when the south finally defeated what was left of the north. The south, Judah, blamed the series of disasters on not following the commands of God well enough. Its priests claimed that power and prosperity would return if the people and the rulers repented and followed the commands of God more closely. The captives returned from Babylon about xxx BCE.

Likely, the Pentateuch (first five books of the Tanakh), and the histories in the Tanakh, were edited and assembled around the time of Solomon, partly as a way to legitimize the rule of the Davidic Kings and their priests. When the captives returned from Babylon, they reconstructed the Tanakh. It received much of the form we know now, largely as a way to explain what had happened and to legitimize the new rulers and their priests. The Tanakh was edited to emphasize the theme of transgressing and following God's word and following the priests, as for example in the story of Moses, the Ten Commandments, and the Golden Calf.

In the 300s BCE, Alexander the Great conquered Iran (Persia), Babylon, and their combined empire. His heirs annexed Judea, the remains of Israel, into their empire. Again, the Jews explained their defeat and loss of freedom by saying they had disobeyed the commands of God. They could achieve freedom again if only they more strictly obeyed the laws of God.

After about 150 BCE, the Romans conquered the Greeks and took most of their empire, including Judea. Jews explained this further setback by saying they did not try hard enough to obey God; so they tried harder. By this time, legalism and strict monotheism permeated Jewish society and culture. This was when purist groups such as the Pharisees began to gain influence.

After the time of Jesus, in a series of campaigns against Judea, the Romans destroyed the state of Israel, destroyed Jerusalem, and ran most of the Jews out of the area to make them refugees all around the empire. Again the Jews explained the disaster by saying they had not followed the commands of God well enough, and they needed to try harder.

When Christianity gained power after about 400 AD, the Christians restricted the political and economic power of the Jews, and often forced them to live in restricted areas. I am not sure if the Jews blamed this latest disaster too on not obeying the commands of God well enough. The Jews did rally around the commands of God as the basis for their new way of life. Using the commands as a common center, the Jews were able to maintain economic, social, and ethnic viability for 2000 years. This is the beginning of Rabbinic Judaism and the Talmud(s) as we know them today.

Legalism has a very strong basis in Jewish history. Legalism makes sense given what the Jews started with and what happened to them. That does not mean it is correct or incorrect.

When Christianity arose, Christianity inherited the attitude of the Jews about the role of God's commands in life, bad happens when the commands are disobeyed, and good happens if the commands are obeyed well enough. Christianity kept that attitude even after it rose to political power after about 400 CE. In part, following Judaism, Christianity credited its rise to power with following God's commands, including his new commands through Jesus.

Islam spread after about 800 CE. When Mohammad and early Muslims suffered setbacks, they explained them the same way. They accepted that, if they followed the commands of God well enough, as God gave them to Mohammad, they would prosper. They did prosper, and they gave credit to the lifestyle of following God's commands. Keep this in mind for the later chapter on Islam.

The European non-Semitic West, including North America, has a legalistic tendency regardless of any ideas it might have inherited from Israel. The Roman codes are as long, detailed, and convoluted as any Judaic code. English common law is a nightmare to any rationalist. Americans make Southeast Asians and East Asians dizzy with their written contracts and legalist points. This legalistic tendency fused with the attitude forged in Israel to help create the legal system in America and to help create the legalism in American style Christianity.

On the positive side for legalism, without Jewish and European legalistic tendencies, we would not have developed and inherited the ideas of the rule of law, of freedom under the law, and that the law should serve social justice.

Thus legalism has had a long strong career in the theistic religions that come from Judaism and legalism has had a long career in the West.

As particular groups of Christians decided they were close to God, they also adopted that idea that they in particular were like the Old Israel; each particular group was the New Israel, and, somehow, Christendom as a whole as also the New Israel even if some groups within it were not. As the New Israel, Christians in general, and self-selected groups of Christians, had to accept God's commands as literally as possible and stick to them as literally as possible. In a similar way, as Muslim groups decided they were close to God, they adopted the idea that they were like original Islam directly under Mohammad, had to accept the commands of God as given by Mohammad as closely as possible and had to stick to them as closely as possible. Whether or not early Islam consciously adopted Israel-Judea as its model, it did adopt the pattern that was set originally by Israel-Judea, and later Muslims followed. Christians and Muslims do not differ much in this regard; both owe their framework to prior Israel-Judea.

When American Christians say America is in decline because Americans have lapsed from God, and America could revive if it returned to God, they are only following a long tradition with strong roots in the origin state of their religion, Israel-Judea. When American Christians fix on a cause, such as opposing abortion or controlling gay people, in order to follow God's commands and return America to God's favor, they only follow a long tradition. It is logical that many Christians believe the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution to have been inspired by God and to be a modern version of his Inspired Word. We must follow them as close to the text as possible or disaster will ensue. If we do follow the texts of the Declaration and Constitution closely, along with the Bible, then America will last long in prosperity and power. All this does not make American Christians correct, but it does make them more understandable.

This kind of legalistic behavior might have a strong basis in tradition, and might have helped the Jews to survive for 2000 years, but that does not mean it is good behavior now or Godly behavior now. Blind legalism now too often works against social groups, and it undermines the state rather than supports it. If God does support a state on the basis of its adherence to his desires for a good life, then, in the modern world, that good Godly life is less likely to be found in ancient legalism than in seeking the spirit of God's commands, Jesus' message, decency, personal freedom, and social justice.

Other Religions, Legalism, and the Legalistic Personality.

The cultural and historical background of Jews goes a long way toward accounting for legalism in Israel, Christianity, and Islam but it cannot account for all legalism there or in other places. India and Hindus have a strong definite strain of legalism and legalistic-like argumentation, and they did not derive it from the Middle Eastern or Judaic tradition. Latin America seems less legalistic than North America yet both were conquered by Christians who had a legalistic tradition. Legalism seems to be as much a matter of personality and culture as of particular religion. I do not know what to make of this situation, and I make nothing more of it here. It is worth mentioning.

Commandments versus Common Sense and Moral Principles.

Most American children, say Suzy and Sam, have gone through a variation of this conversation: They have done something bad and been caught, such as drinking alcohol. They offer as an explanation, "Everybody else was doing it, especially the cool kids, and especially not the un-cool kids". Mom-and-Dad retort, "If all your friends jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge, would you do that too? Why don't you listen to Billy goody-two-shoes instead of that hoodlum Jack?" We shouldn't act on the basis of external influence alone. We evaluate suggestions according to common sense and general moral principles. If suggestions violate either, then we shouldn't act, even if we gain in other ways such as a reputation for bravery and fitting in with the really cool kids. When listening to suggestions, it matters who we listen to. We should listen to people who have a proven track record of success at things that matter in the long run, and who suggest acts that go along with common sense and general moral principles. If only all children were so sensible, and all situations so clear-cut; then Mom-and-Dad would not be necessary.

Suzy and Sam have a valid partial defense rooted in our evolutionary history, but Mom-and-Dad don't accept Sam-and-Suzy's defense because it reminds them of their own youth, and because it doesn't work when taken too far. Common sense is not the same for all situations because not all situations need the same strategies for success. In our evolutionary past, sometimes it was important to be brave, set up a persona, make a reputation, fit in, and especially fit in with the "cool kids". Sometimes it was useful to follow the rules of the cool kids rather than of the nerds. Sometimes it was useful to pass through rituals so as to commit to a group. Sometimes it was useful to share danger and intoxication. The goal is to get past all this now so as to reap the benefits later without any more of the danger later. We hope that we do get past it, and that we don't get trapped or wrecked along the way. We don't want Sam or Suzy to turn into juicers or burnouts, we don't want them in car crashes, and we don't want Suzy pregnant. That is what Mom-and-Dad really want to achieve with admonitions.

The commandments of God put us in a similar situation as Suzy and Sam listening to Jack. What if the commandments of God do not follow common sense and general moral principles? Which God do we listen to? Whose God? Which prophet do we listen to? The commandments of God rarely come directly from God to us personally; always some real imperfect human, like Jack, tells us what he-she thinks the commandments of God are. Prophets differ in what they declare the important commandments of God. If all commandments of God exactly followed common sense and general moral principles, we wouldn't need the commandments of God, the prophets, or Mom-and-Dad. If we use common sense and general moral principles to decide which prophet to listen to, then we don't need the prophet to begin with.

Common sense and general moral principles can't cover all cases, and, worse, they are not always much fun or very "sexy". They don't give us that thrill of succeeding at comparative competition or of belonging to the cool kids. That is when the commandments of God can prove useful. That still leaves open which prophet we listen to. We listen to the prophet that we were born with, and we listen to the prophet that offers us the commandments of God that best serve self-interest, even if we are deluded about our self-interest.

All too often, we listen to people that use our need for order, commitment, belonging, and coolness to manipulate us to serve their self-interests.

So we are back to Suzy and Sam getting drunk because, at the time, they thought it was cool and would make them popular, and all the other cool kids were doing it, especially the prophet Jack. We are back to getting stuck in laws, seeking power and wealth in the name of God, and zealotry in the name of God. We are back to people killing abortion doctors, blowing up buses full of school children, beating women, shooting girls who want to get an education, beating up gay people, enabling people who want to live off the state, and enabling people who use the law selfishly. There is no easy way out, especially because the large majority of people will not examine the sayings of a prophet in the light of common sense and general moral principles.

Don't take the commandments of God, or the sayings of any one prophet, at face value. There are now enough simple accounts of all religions and prophets so you can consider them. You can weigh Islam against Christianity. You can weigh sensible original Islam against stupid radical Islam. You can weigh the ideas in this book against the ideas of your childhood. You personally have to make the bridge between common sense and general moral principles to the commandments of God as spoken by some particular prophet. If your legalistic system is an integral part of your group identity, and does not hurt anyone in your group or out of your group, then follow your tradition without disparaging others - unless the others cause harm.

Rules for Life.

In particular circumstances, some ways of life work better than others. Humans always have had to deal with at least two ways of life at the same time. They led one way of life among close in-groups members, especially family. They led another way of life with out-group people. Usually, they led one way of life with out-group people who were likely allies and might be mates; another way with out-group people they did not know very well but who were not confirmed prey or enemies; and yet another way of life with prey or enemies. It was not always easy to switch from one mode to another mode. It could take a long time

to learn through experience that a behavior that seemed a good tactic in the short run might be disaster in the long run, especially because they outcome depended on who you used it with. It is a bad idea to lie to family members but a good idea to lie to enemies.

When faced with uncertainty, people use rules. Rules help people behave properly until people can see for themselves why they should behave properly. If some people never see why, rules still help them behave, so help everybody else, and probably even indirectly help the people who don't see. This was the same reasoning I used to explain codes.

Rules can be encoded as laws but don't have to be. They can also be encoded in rituals, dances, visual art, myths, music, song, stories, journeys, etc. It is not clear why some rules are encoded in some ways rather than others. It is also not clear what difference it makes in how rules are encoded. This chapter wonders if being encoded in formal written laws makes a difference.

Once rules are encoded, other problems arise. Rules suffer from the same paradox as religion. They need to be firm and a little crazy but not too firm or too crazy. Rules and religion get their paradox problems from each other.

Before people will follow rules that they don't understand, they have to believe the rules come from a powerful higher authority. The rules have to be coupled with religion and morality. Religion, morality, and rules tend all to go together. This coupling is why rules cannot only be about what is obvious practically but have to have a tinge of craziness and commitment. To be fully practical, we have to be susceptible to not being fully practical.

If rules are too specific, they are not useful and they are annoying. If rules are too general, they are hard to understand and apply. Rules have to be the correct "specificity". The degree of specificity varies with the arena for the rule. We need sharper rules for some sexuality than we need for gift giving. There is an art to making rules. This "haziness" in rules is an important reason why they need not be encoded in formal written language but sometimes are better encoded other ways such as art.

Rules have to be interpreted to be useful. We need an agency for interpreting rules to fit particular situations. The agency itself is the product of rules.

Life changes. Rules should change too. Some of the change in rule use can be handled through the fuzziness and interpretation of rules but sometimes the rule itself has to change. Yet rules are partly about not doing what seems obvious, and partly about not changing. It is a big deal to change a big rule. There have to be rules for changing rules, like the rules for amending the US Constitution.

Plan for Life.

Rules have to help us get along in life but we commit to them precisely because they are not a simple obvious plan for life. We commit to them because they are God's law. In terms borrowed from modern family values: We can follow God's law because it is a good plan for life or because it is God's law. Modern family values adherents trust that God's law will always be the best way to live but that does not have to be so. Sometimes it is not the most obvious way to be successful. When God's law does not

always provide the best plan for success, we have to follow it anyway because it is God's law. Modern strong Christians in America back up this idea with the belief that God will collectively punish any country that does not follow his law regardless of temptations to do otherwise and to succeed. What happens when people follow God's law anyway even if it does not lead to obvious success and to getting along with other people? Is the end result always bad?

Kinds of Zaniness.

For this chapter, and only for this chapter, we can distinguish three kinds of religious zaniness. The kinds are not exclusive, and, in practice, overlap much.

The first kind of zaniness leads us act in ways that handicap ourselves in comparative competition, such as giving heartily to charities. This kind might have helped in the past, especially if they had been aimed primarily at our in-group. Whatever the past, these ways don't clearly serve out needs in modern plural capitalist society.

The second kind is by fostering really harmful behavior both to society at large and to ourselves. The most notorious examples are drinking the juice at Jamestown, suicide bombing, and poisoning the Tokyo subways; but other lesser behaviors are detrimental too, such as chanting in airports or proselytizing door-to-door.

The third kind of oddness is amusing if you are not caught up in it. Religion leads to strange groups, often with strange costumes and behavior. We might include functional groups within religions, such as priests, but mostly I have in mind splinter groups that act and look distinctive. In the 1970s, the paradigm case was the Hare Krishna people. In major cities now, we can find Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu groups like this; I don't know the names of most of them. Some groups now have considerable chic, such as the Amish in the United States. Buddhist and Taoists are not immune from this zaniness, but they tend to keep their zaniness out of the public eye, and they are usually confined to the Far East, so Americans are not as familiar with them. I do not consider practitioners of Tai Chi to be such a group although practitioners of Qi Gong might be.

People do not mind zaniness that does little harm. I don't care either. I am concerned with zaniness that can do harm. That I call "crazy".

I am not sure if having a single powerful formal text makes a religion more prone to any such zaniness, or to stronger forms of zaniness. Even in religions with no clear single texts for all groups, such as Taoism, some text usually is at the bottom of a zany group or zany behavior; every type of Qi Gong inevitably has its secret diagrams and formulas. White Power and Black Power groups have manifestos. Whether the text preceded and caused the group, or the group formed first and uses the text as an excuse, or some combination, is a historical question for each particular group. I think it usually is a combination. Even if having a single powerful text makes zaniness more likely, the difference is probably not large. I doubt we can blame all urban Jewish and Muslim groups primarily on the existence of the Tanakh, Talmud, Koran, or Hadith, any more than we can blame the Bhagavad Gita for the Hare Krishna people. I doubt we can blame all the Protestant Christian splinter groups on the New Testament.

Good Effects of Strong Adherence to the Word-Laws of God.

Strong adherence to the words-laws of God is not all bad. Jewish legalism allowed them to maintain their identity as an ethnic group in the face of terrible pressure for over 2000 years, and to maintain their faith in God. Without Jewish legalism, ethical monotheism as we know it would not have prevailed. There would not have been a Jewish personal God to merge with a Greek philosophical god. People would not believe in a single moral God. We would not have ideas of scientific laws without some mild legalism to make us appreciate the power of objective laws. We would not have our idea of the rule of law above the subjective will of rulers. Without Jewish legalism, the setting for Jesus would not have been prepared, Jesus could not have come, and the message of Jesus would have fallen as flat in the Middle East and Europe as in other regions of the world. Without Muslim legalism, Muslims would not have protected other ethnic groups and other faiths. Without Muslim legalism, the best ideas of Islam would not be carried on today.

Remarks on Legalism and “Crazy” Groups.

Sooner or later, most of the time, hard-line legalism obstructs successful living, and people give it up in favor of a more reasonable approach, so usually it is not much of an issue. It is an issue in the modern world because some groups of Jews, Christians, and Muslims use hard-line legalism as an excuse for hurting other people. Only a selfish bad person believes God will send you to heaven for the suicide bombing of innocent civilians but Christians and Muslims have cited scripture to prove God will reward them thus.

Are Jews, Christians, and Muslims more prone to forming groups of crazies because of their legalistic tradition? I am not sure. I think the answer runs more along these lines:

Some groups feel disadvantaged by mainstream trends in successful living. In particular, now, groups feel threatened by trends in modernization such as the emancipation of women and minorities. They want to protect their position against change, enhance their comparative position, and hurt rivals. They want the state to support their ideas and to oppose the ideas of rivals. They want the state to stop the future, or slow down the future, until they can secure top position. Fundamentalists of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim basis all fit this bill and carry out these strategies, so use your personal experience as a source of examples.

To remain viable, these groups need a strong commitment both to themselves and against enemies. They borrow the strong feelings of the greater religion to use for their ends. Where texts-laws-words-of-God are available, those make particularly good tools because they have already been accepted by the mainstream religion. If these groups can, they use the mainstream religion against itself. They capture the mainstream religion. They redefine proper worship as carefully following the texts that they select as the basis for God's word and the law. They redefine the texts as being not primarily about a successful way of life but as being about following God's Word to the letter. Of course, they also say that the texts support their way of life as the proper way of life, and, if the texts are followed, then their way of life will also be a successful way of life. They call on God to reshape society. They assume God uses collective punishment and reward to reshape society. As mentioned, in the West, they use the example of Israel as a model. So, where texts with laws are available, some groups will use them as the basis for legalism.

Groups in religions where there are not texts with laws face the same problems and want to carry out the same strategies, but they might not be able to use these ideas, mainstream religion, and the state, in quite the same way. So legalism probably does support annoying groups to some extent. It is likely not a large extent.

Whether legalistically-based annoying groups occur more often, or more strongly, in particular kinds of religions is an empirical question, a question of fact. It can be settled by investigation. I do not know of any investigation that definitively answers the question. Problems with political correctness might make the investigation hard to carry out.

Not only “crazy” groups with a problem quote scripture to enhance cohesion and fight the mainstream. Good-willed people who want to guide us into the future also seek precedents in their scriptural tradition, and might quote those to help. Unfortunately, “crazy” groups with a problem seem to quote scripture more often than good-will farsighted people. We have come to link quoting scripture with having a hidden agenda. We distrust bible bangers. Because we make the link between quoting scripture and out-of-bounds-craziness, good-will farsighted people are even less likely to quote scripture (politically incorrect), so only crazy people do quote scripture, and so the link of scripture to crazies becomes even stronger. The stronger the link becomes the less likely good-willed people are to quote scripture and the more likely bad-willed people are to quote scripture. The situation is like a self-fulfilling prophecy. A bifurcation in identity occurs, with crazy-bible-thumpers on the one hand and sane bible-illiterates on the other. This does not mean all crazy groups come only from religions with the give world of God, or that all religions with a respect for scripture have to generate crazy groups.

The link between craziness and scriptural legalism also means that people in those traditions reject the work of prophets and of other good people outside their traditions. This might be the single biggest casualty of bad legalism. Smart people with religious sensibilities have written some good things. It does not make you a legalistic crazy to read them.

PART 3: Exclusivity

“Exclusivity” is fancy way to say a religion accepts only its own gods and it rejects the gods of all other religions. A given religion can reject other gods in several ways: (1) Other gods simply don’t exist and are figments of imagination. (2) Other gods are so unimportant and weak compared to our god that we don’t need to consider them. We look down on them and reject them. It is not clear where the other gods came from but it doesn’t matter. (3) Our god created other gods as helper minor gods. Likely they were supposed to be good, but became bad. In Christian and Muslim terms, the other gods became demons; other religions worship demons. (4) Our god deliberately created other lesser gods with bad characters to serve as foils.

While, in theory, a religion with many gods could accept only its own gods and could actively reject all the other gods of all other religions, in practice that rarely happens. Usually religions with many gods tolerate the gods of other religions even if they don’t accept them warmly. Usually only a religion with one god actively rejects the gods of all other religions. That is the only case I consider.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam accept only one God, and reject the gods of all other religions. In various cases, they have used all the major modes of rejection. There is no point going into details.

In theory, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam worship the same God – Yahweh-EI, “God”, and Allah - and so could accept each other’s God as the same God and as worthy of similar worship. In practice, that is not often so. Essentially, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam reject each other first as social-cultural-political-ethnic-religious groups and so do not accept each other’s god as the same god. To not accept the god of another group to be the same as your god is a way to keep that other group at a distance even if you do not actively reject their god. To accept the god of another group to be the same as the god of your group, even if only in theory, veers too closely to merging groups.

High Hinduism, high Buddhism, and high Taoism insist the gods are not very important even though they do accept the existence of many gods. In common practice, the gods are quite important, but that is not the focus here. In theory, Jews, Christians, and Muslims could allow a place for ideas of high Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. In practice, that does not happen either. In part, that does not happen because the monotheistic religions simply distrust every other religion and especially distrust religions that allow many gods even when the other religions claim those gods are not important.

High Taoism and high Confucianism from China really allow only one God, Heaven, with its one “force”, the Tao. For more details, see the chapter on China. I easily see links between the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam with the Heaven of China. Since the middle of the 1800s, thinkers have pursued this line but not much has come of it in terms of actual reconciliation between religions. I don’t go into that issue here.

Just as legalism in the monotheistic religions has strong deep historical roots, so does exclusivity and distrust for other religions. God’s ideas about himself and about his relation to other gods are obscured because the ideas underwent historical development and the one God of Israel likely resulted from the fusion of two gods, Yahweh and EI. What I say here is only a gloss.

The famous Ten Commandments were given by God to the Israelites. The first says, in part and in my words, “You shall not have any other gods before me”. God rejects all other gods and all other religions. While God does not scorn ethnic and national groups other than the Israelites, he does not accept an important part of their way of life, their religion. As long as they cling to that religion, God cannot accept foreigners. They must convert to the religion of the one highest God, as the Assyrians supposedly did in the Book of Jonah.

In the Ten Commandments and in other passages that are probably early in the Tanakh, God does NOT say he is the one and only god. In fact, in early passages, God, as EI, is part of an assemblage of gods, including a wife, and likely including children. It is not clear in the Ten Commandments if God means “you shall not have any other gods before me and my group”. In any case, God does not deny other gods, and seems to accept the existence of other gods. God only says they are not as important and not as powerful, and that the Israelites should have nothing to do with them.

To have anything to do with other gods effectively is to deny and reject God. So it is better to reject and push away all other gods. Even to acknowledge that they have some power of their own is dangerous because it implies an autonomous alternative to the greater power of God.

Eventually, the Israelites came to believe there is only one God, not Yahweh and El distinctly, and not a family group. Other gods are not merely weaker and unimportant, they do not exist. Angels do exist but they are only messengers of God and are they entirely derivative on him and his power (the “Shekinah” or the “Holy Spirit”).

The Israelites blamed national and personal setbacks on not stringently following the commands of God. Perhaps the most serious breach is accepting other gods even tacitly. One of the chief problems in this regard came about because of mixing with other people and their gods, in particular through marriage. As most people who know who marry outside their ethnic group and religion, a spouse has trouble giving up his-her religion and gods. Usually such households become, in effect, households of two religions and at least two gods. When the Israelites conquered their neighbors, they often killed the men and took the women as wives and slave concubines. The women kept their native gods and native rituals. When Israelite men married neighboring women, the women usually kept their gods and rituals. Often the children followed their mothers and-or worshipped both God and the gods of their mothers. The Israelite prophets and priests blamed this practice for the troubles of Israel. God didn’t like it. To make God happy and restore Israel, in-marrying spouses had to abandon their gods and had to actively worship only the one God of Israel. It is easy to say “abandon all other gods”, and it is easy to suppress other gods and their worship for a while, but it is not easy to keep up suppression. Many times, the worship of other gods would be suppressed for a while, at least in the minds of priests and rulers, only to reappear again when Israelite men married neighbor women. Then the priests would get angry again, and the cycle would repeat.

Especially after the historical events related above, the Israelites became stern about the idea that there is only one God and that all worship must be directed to him alone. Other gods did not exist. Worship of other gods, even if they did not exist, could not be tolerated on Israelite holy ground. Israelites could not worship any other god in any other way. All worship other than of God was horrible idolatry.

In the Greek and Roman Classical world, it was common to raise heroes to divine status, and some gods began as mortals. Heracles (Hercules) was given the status of a god. Polydeukes (“Pollux” in Latin, now “Polioudakis” in English) was the divine brother of twins. The mortal brother was “Kastor” (“Castor”). Eventually they shared their divinity. Roman emperors were often deified. All this was unacceptable to Jews. It was the same as worshipping other gods, the same as idolatry. No mere mortal could partake even to the smallest extent of divinity. To do so was to undermine the divinity and integrity of the one God. Worship of divinities, including heroes, featured dinners in which the food was first sanctified by being offered to the divinity. Jews could not touch that food.

God gave the geographical land of Israel to the Israelites. There, worship of God had to prevail. Territory was identified with theology and ethnic identity. God also made clear that foreigners were to be treated well, and not persecuted, as long as they did not hurt the worship of God. Israelites were to treat foreign people better than the Egyptians had reputedly treated the Hebrews in Egypt. Foreigners could not build temples and could not worship their gods in any way that seduced Israelites away from worship of God.

Foreigners could not raise children of mixed marriages to worship other gods. Foreigners could worship their own gods politely in the confines of their own homes. Foreigners did have to pay interest on loans even when Israelites did not.

After Israel was conquered by Assyria, Persia, and Babylon, the angel "Set" was raised to the status of the powerful demigod "Satan" or, in Christian terms, the Devil. It is not clear if Jews then understood that, in raising Set to this status, they were, in effect, creating another god, and, indirectly, worshipping the power of another god. I don't think they generally understood the situation this way yet it had this effect. Not all Jews stressed the role of Satan, and I think most modern Jews do not stress the role of Satan. Most modern Jews appear to have abandoned Set as a god or as anything.

No nation likes to be conquered, to have foreign people in power on its land, and to have foreign gods worshipped on its soil. For Israel, being occupied by a series of foreign powers was doubly offensive because God expressly set aside the territory of Israel for his worship and expressly forbid the worship of any other deities on that land. Even if Jews did not worship foreign gods, the presence of any public worship of foreign gods was offensive. When a more powerful country occupies a less powerful country, the children of the less powerful people naturally emulate the powerful people and tend to worship the same gods as the powerful people. This is part of what worries Muslims about modernism, when their children begin to worship Walt Disney characters, rock stars, and fast food. Such worship is exactly what earlier Israelites blamed for the demise of Israel and what they condemned. Contrary to misconception, the conquerors, even Romans, usually respected Jewish wishes for worship. But even small mistakes and events led to large reactions, which then snowballed into worse situations.

When Israel became Judea and the Israelites became the Jews, the Jews kept all of this attitude. After the Jews were dispersed out of the land of Judea and Israel, they intensified this attitude. Even today, Jews are among the groups that most strongly stress that an in-marrying spouse convert to Judaism and that children be raised as Jews worshipping only the one God.

When Christians and Muslims branched off from Judaism, they inherited the strict attitude about one God. They also inherited ideas about Satan without quite realizing that they inherited another god.

For Christians, the idea of one God helped in making converts, and so became stronger. People in the Roman Empire at around the time of Jesus were familiar with the idea of one god from religions like Judaism and from philosophical ideas about one god. Judaism had great respect as the earliest religion of one god. Christianity inherited that respect and offered an easier way to worship the one god.

Mohammad had to build Islam by actively and sternly repressing the many gods of the Arabs at the time. In doing so, he greatly stressed the idea of one all-powerful all-good God, which continues to this day in Islam.

To Israelites and Jews, God appears both as God and as God's power, the Shekinah, or, later, the Holy Spirit. It is the Shekinah who punished the Egyptians and who forced Moses to circumcise his son on penalty of death. God and his Power are always in accord. Israelites did not see this dual identity as two gods nor do Jews now. I am not sure how Jews deal with this issue in theology. Christians and Muslims inherited this dual way of looking at God. In Muslim thought, I am not sure how separate God and his

Power are. I do not know what Muslims make of this distinction theologically. For Christians, the two aspects of God became part of the Trinity that also included Jesus. Very much has been written on the theology of the Trinity, and I do not go into it here. To Christians, the divinity of Jesus as an aspect of God seemed a natural outgrowth of the same ideas that allowed the Holy Spirit (Power of God) to be a separate aspect of the same underlying Father God.

Jews and Muslims could not accept that Jesus partook of the same divinity of God as did the Power of God, perhaps in part because Jesus was only a man, and Jews and Muslims did not wish to treat him as a semi-divine classical hero. To do so was too much like idol worship, too much like accepting the gods of foreign wives. Because Jesus is an integral part of the Trinity of God for Christians, and so an integral part of God's identity, Jews and Muslims thus have trouble seeing the God of Christians as being the same as the Yahweh-El of the Jews or the Allah of Muslims. It is unlikely this situation will change in the near future.

I do not know exactly what theoretical issues divide Jews and Muslims on the identity of God. Muslims altered the mythological history that appears in the Jewish Tanakh, but do not seem to have changed the identity of God when they changed some events and people in the Tanakh. Mohammad insisted that he worshipped the same God as the Jews and Christians. Even if there is no theoretical difference between the two gods, it is unlikely that Jews and Muslims will feel good about seeing their two gods as the same God in the near future, so it is not worthwhile going into the question here.

American Christians have inherited the same ideas about God, idols, other gods, foreign worship, and the relation of God to the welfare of the nation, altered, of course, by including Jesus in the aspects of God. Transplanting Jewish ideas to America does not necessarily make the ideas right or wrong. We have to decide that for ourselves based on principles that we hold important and correct. I think the transplanted ideas about God and the nation are wrong based on the principles that I hold.

To an American Christian before the days of political correctness, non-Christians were like foreigners in Israel. In fact, to a Protestant American, non-Protestants, including Roman Catholics such as the Irish and Italians, were like foreigners in Israel. Although the Constitution prohibits any official state church, still, the semi-official religion was Protestant Christianity and other religions were foreign. People of other religions could quietly practice as long as they did not seduce good Christian Americans into their religion and they did not affect politics. To say this of American Christians before political correctness is not an insult. Their attitude would have been perfectly natural given human nature and their particular heritage, and their attitude would have been as tolerant as most places on Earth.

Even now, for many American Christians, to abandon a strong clear commitment to the one God is to invite disaster. Even without establishing an official church, America can still show that it is committed to the one true God through its non-official ceremonies and through education, entertainment, politics, and the media. To allow the spread of different religions in America is to insult God and to invite his wrath. It is the same as condoning idolatry regardless of how moral and reasonable the other religions might be. Only if other religions and other believers can be controlled like guests could we expect God to be happy with religious diversity in America.

Even when Americans are not explicitly Christians, they still take this mindset as a way to see situations and respond. When I was in school in the 1970s, a wave of anti-science overran America. Science is not just another ideology, but opponents of science declared it to be that. As just another ideology, science could be judged as an ideology, that is, as a foreign religion. In effect, politically correct people declared their ideas to be the one true religion of the one true god, and declared science to be a false idolatry. To believe in science was to invite social and ecological disaster. Only by repenting of science and returning to the one true god of political correctness and natural harmony could disaster be averted and the country returned to a correct course. Many Christians take this same attitude toward science, treating it as a false god. Ironically, anti-science politically correct people use this stance against science as an argument for simple-minded “nature is always good” environmentalism while anti-science Christians use this attitude of science-as-false-religion to deny climate change and to hurt nature. This result shows how ideas about one true god and one true religion can be adjusted to fit needs. I don't know if politically correct people learned this attitude from Christians or vice versa.

Assessment.

What God did with ancient Israel does not matter in the present assessment.

I think it is easier for people to accept the message of Jesus, and to accept the message of Jesus mixed with modern values about freedom and government, if they believe in only one god, and if the god has the traits of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim God, and-or has traits similar to Chinese “Heaven”. This does not mean people whose god differs from God, or whose religion allows many gods, cannot understand and follow the message. But it is harder. In effect, people with many gods have to ignore their gods to focus on the message and on one source for the message. They have to think how the message could have come out of their matrix of gods. People who believe in “nature” or “the universe” have to think through how nature or the universe supports the message of Jesus and modern enlightened democracy. Many intelligent, educated, inspired, or decent members of polytheistic religions already do this. Some people who believe in nature or the universe do this but usually without intellectual rigor. Most atheists do this. I comment more on particular religions in later chapters.

Christianity and Islam effectively worship the Devil (Satan) through the fear, attention, excitement, and respect they give him. Through worship of Jesus, saints, Mary, the Devil, powerful historical holy people, clerics, and charismatic religious leaders, Christianity and Islam are polytheistic in practice even if they adamantly deny it in theory. They are much like other devotional polytheistic religions such as Hinduism. I think they need to reduce their devotion to the Satan, saints, etc. in order to focus more on the message of Jesus mixed with modern values.

Except for perhaps the modern state of Israel, God does not collectively reward or punish nations for keeping or breaking his commands. Life is now so interconnected that nations effectively reward and punish themselves for good policies and bad policies. The policies might have some basis in some of God's commands but the policies certainly do not have to take account of all his commands and they do not have to explicitly recognize God. Good beneficial self-rewarding policy is rooted in Jesus' message combined with modern values. God does not collectively punish America or any nation for not explicitly believing in him or for allowing the worship of other gods. God does not reward America or any nation for putting up the Ten Commandments in courthouses, as with Justice Roy Moore of Alabama. God does

not reward America or any nation for officially recognizing God or for recognizing God in media, politics, or national ceremonies. God is happy if we accept the historical roots of our values in Judeo-Christian-Muslim history but his happiness does not translate into collective reward or punishment.

I don't know what God's relation is to the modern state of Israel. I doubt God collectively rewards and punishes it. God cannot expect all the Israelis to keep all the commandments all the time. I doubt God is waiting for the rebuilding of the Temple and the restarting of animal sacrifices there. I think God is waiting for Israelis to pioneer in explaining and seeking social justice as in Isaiah and Jeremiah. Likely God is happy that most Jews love and respect him, and likely he is happy when Israelis treat foreigners with the kindness and respect described in the Tanakh, including letting them practice their own religions within reasonable limits. I leave it to Jews, Christians, Muslims, and any other interested parties, to work this out for themselves.

PART 4: Fundamentalism

Here I only summarize what I said in other ways in other parts of the book. This part of the chapter is not a general treatise on fundamentalism. I focus on recent American Christian fundamentalism but most of the comments would apply to other versions of fundamentalism. I mix up fundamentalists and religious conservatives but I don't know how to separate them. In fairness, I should assess liberalism as well but here is not a convenient place to do that.

Modern American Christian fundamentalism began in the late 1800s, especially around the 1920s, when groups of Christians got "fed up" with social, political, and economic changes, and sought a return to a better life. They sought the basis for a better life in the basic ideas of their religion and the commands of God. In theory, they went back to the Nicene Creed, or something very similar, in which the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus save people who believe in him as God. They took on the mantle of the next New Israel, and took on the duty of following God's commands. In theory, they accept every command of God as binding and as equally binding. They believe God gives us commands to guide us to the Good Life. God punishes people who do not follow his commands and who do not believe in him as the one and only god. God punishes nations that do not follow his commands and do not support the worship of him as the one and only true religion. Most fundamentalist groups assumed God's commands mostly went along with nature. Nature is an expression of his will. His commands reminded people of their basic God-given nature so people could live the Good Godly Life largely in accord with natural human nature, for example "Honor thy father and mother".

In practice, fundamentalists pick, interpret, and stress various particular commands of God according to their needs and agendas. All groups of all kinds, fundamentalists and otherwise, do this.

Like any good sports team that knows it has talent but is in a bad spell, they "got back to basics" and "regrouped". Scientists do the same when scientists are deeply puzzled, return to basic experimental results, and return to basic concepts. This is how Einstein came up with Relativity, to keep Galilean insights about the reliability of frames of reference as applied to light, gravity, and changes in motion. Even Marxists do that when they return to Marx, Engels, Lenin, Mao, or Chou.

I point out parallels to stress that fundamentalism is not inherently bad, stupid, reactionary, anti-natural, naturalistic, or even conservative. What matters are the specific points, the criteria for fundamentals, the criteria for criteria, what fundamentals you recognize, what you do with the fundamentals, and what you do with ideas that are not fundamental.

Fundamentalists could have dealt with the problem of God's commands and the Good life openly. They could accept as fundamental ideas from their religion that go along with recent science, ethics, social science, and pluralistic democracy. They can accept that it is impossible to adhere to all the commands, and openly acknowledge that they select, rank, and interpret. They need not put recent thinking ahead of commands from the Bible but they can consider how God's commands relate to objective facts such as evolution and the Big Bang. They can think about how to reconcile the Golden Rule with evolution and with recent thinkers such as Bertrand Russell or John Rawls. They can think about which social and economic changes actually go along with the fundamentals, and support those. They can think about which social changes do not endanger the fundamentals, and leave those alone. They can think about how to use various approaches to correct the social changes that endanger their idea of the Good Life, approaches such as the pulpit, media, and politics. They can use only approaches that support their own fundamentals and do not undermine the general welfare. After a long time of not taking this approach, it appears the Roman Catholic Church now is taking this approach, at least with hard science including evolution.

As far as I can tell, American fundamentalists did not do that. Instead, they declared all commands are equally valid but they surreptitiously picked some commands as key while ignoring others. They insisted they have the right to choose which Christian values are fundamental, and only they have that right. They used God to promote their hidden agenda. Even if the "hidden" agenda is easy to spot, and even if you agree with the agenda, it is wrong to use God to do this. In fact, it is blasphemous to use God to do this no matter how good the agenda.

They stressed ideas that would make them distinct and would give them great power if the ideas were generally accepted. They stressed issues that would make them distinct and would give them great power if they won. This tactic is typical in group fighting.

They assumed America is the modern nation of God, the modern equivalent of Israel. They assumed God's commands and nature completely coincide. God's way is the natural way, and vice versa. Their ideas of what is natural are God's ideas of what is natural; anything else is perverted and ungodly; God will punish anybody who does not live according to their ideas of what is natural; and God will punish any nation that allows people to live unnaturally and in ungodly ways. Especially America must accept God and all his commands or else God will punish America. If America accepts God and all his commands, then God will reward America. Fully pluralistic democracy is not possible. People who believe in other religions can live in America much as non-Jew foreigners used to live in Israel as guests; but people of other religions cannot be full citizens with full rights of worship any more than foreigners could in Israel. Even Jews in America are like foreigners were in Israel. The issues that fundamentalists picked to boost their solidarity and power include: increased militarism, welfare, abortion, immigration, climate change, cheap energy, birth control, drugs, stiff criminal penalties, state support for business, and minimal rights for ethnic groups and gender groups. They insisted that America now reflect Christian values that were important in the founding of America even when, in some cases, such as separation of church and state,

their position contradicted the founders of the state. They decided that an unrealistic idealized version of the market was natural, godly, and automatically could solve all problems. They allied with political conservatives, with White reactionaries, and against most social change. If they were Black or Hispanic, they allied with Black or Hispanic reactionaries.

It is not hard to see what really drives their agenda: a return to an idealized unreal unrealistic America from the 1920s or 1950s in which they dominate. Even if you enjoy this idealized version of America, and agree with most of its values, you can still be uneasy about using religious fundamentals to try to return to something that cannot be achieved. You should be uneasy about using an appeal to the Good Life to support a state in which the Good Life cannot be achieved. Even if you think the Good Life can be achieved, you should still be uneasy using religious fundamentalism to run the state. Even if you think the Good Life can be achieved, you should be quite uneasy about using an appeal to God to do it. The founders of America never intended any of this even if they were devout Christians.

Some fundamentalist attitudes amount to idolatry or blasphemy. America is not the modern Israel. The fundamentalist idea that the family, love, and sex all come in only one natural version, and that God fully supports only their one natural version to the exclusion of all alternatives, is idolatry, even if well-intended. Their idea that the free market is entirely consistent with the New Testament is wrong. Their idea that the market automatically solves all problems is wrong even if, like me, you like capitalism. Fundamentalists worship an idealized dangerous view of the market instead of worshipping God. Their attitude toward the market is blasphemous idolatry. Fear of the Devil is worship of the Devil when we see his power behind everything that annoys us. It is seriously wrong to use God to promote even good ideas if you do so for your own reasons and if God does not explicitly and clearly endorse those ideas.

Some of their ideas are just misguided and factually wrong. Their rejection of science in general and evolution in particular is hard to understand. It is not necessary to reject science and evolution so as to develop correct ideas about human nature, family, and state. It is not necessary to reject evolution to connect ideas about human nature to God. The fundamentalist idealized version of the family actually has fairly strong roots in human evolutionary history even if it was never the only type of family in our history. It is possible to build an idea of families and family variation similar to the ideal family using ideas from evolution. This approach to the family would allow for the family to be flexible in various conditions and still keep a solid place for parents, children, and good relations. Yet fundamentalists reject this alternative, and, instead, deny evolution so they can categorically assert that only their version of the family, and of human nature, is natural and god-given, and so they can assert that their way of life is immutable. It is not necessary to insist that a modern democracy be based on their idea of Christianity just because many of the principles that were used to found America came out of several Christian traditions. The Jewish idea of law was used as the basis for the Christian idea of law but we need not return to the Jewish idea of law to have a modern state. Modern industrialism and consumerism is hurting the planet on which we depend for life. To deny that fact is willful ideological blindness in the service of selfishness. We should not deny science just so we can keep our indulgent lifestyles as long as the planet will let us get away with it. Fundamentalists are wrong about what God wants for the modern state. They are wrong in not supporting pluralistic democracy.

Given the long Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition about the importance of God's commands in the state and for the Good Life, and the danger of breaking his commands, the fundamentalist position does make

sense. It makes sense to avoid offending God. Their vision of the family is one good vision of the family as long as they also accept alternatives and they do not insist that only one vision is god-given and immutable. Fundamentalists are factually correct to point out that social and economic changes have contributed to general malaise and lack of direction. They are correct that a strong religious vision among private citizens would contribute to a sense of direction.

Fundamentalists are wrong that modern problems are a punishment from God for falling away from his commands. Rebellious children are not a punishment for falling away from idealized versions of the family. The economic collapse of 2007 was not a punishment for not persecuting gay people. I doubt God cares about gay sex nearly as much as fundamentalists; and I doubt God has punished America for not persecuting gay people as harshly as in the past. God cares far more about whether gay people are good citizens of his Kingdom and pluralistic democracy. The divorce rate is not a punishment from God for some transgression and it is not a sin for which God will punish America. The modern divorce rate is simply an unintended sad result of the freedom that comes of the same free market that fundamentalists otherwise extol. Cancer is not a punishment for not having a strong military. When not caused by genes, if anything, cancer is the automatic result of self-inflicted pollution and self-chosen bad lifestyles.

We offend God much more in other ways than by allowing diversity in family life and sexuality. God is angry at America for not making pluralistic democracy work better. God is angry at America for not respecting science. He is angry at America and fundamentalists for worshipping the capitalist market and angry at fundamentalists for tacitly worshipping the Devil. God is angry at America for not dealing with poverty and the problems of nature. God is angry with us for not finding ways to deal with social and economic problems without corrupting people and business firms by enabling them as clients of the state. God is angry at America for allowing wealth to take over the government. God is angry at America for a bad distribution of wealth that is not based on productivity, and for allowing the rich to get richer while the poor get miserable. God is angry at America for destroying the middle class and the proud working class. Even though God is angry at America for all these faults, he does not punish us collectively. God leaves that to the automatic working of nature and society.

Some fundamentalist critiques of modern life are correct. Modern people certainly feel malaise even when they are prosperous. Children are better off in safe loving families where they have both men and women role models (gay and straight), and from where they can experience a variety of life styles. Some ethnic groups and other special interest groups have learned to manipulate the state to get what they want, as witness the school cheating scandal in Atlanta in 2013. Some family styles are poisonous, as when men and women have children by many different "spouses". Some cultural styles are poisonous, as when men use women to manufacture babies that they will not support, when a social group devalues education, or when a social group values indecency. Dependence on the state is poisonous, whether by individuals, families, business firms, or ethnic groups. Refusing to see our religious heritage and the role it played in the foundation of modern democracies is ideological blindness. Ideological blindness in one realm bleeds over to other realms. Denying the role of religion in people's lives as a way to block groups that use belief to stir up trouble is like hiding your head in the sand.

The problem is that the fundamentalist way to deal with problems is bound to fail and bound to make the problems worse. Fundamentalist support for Republican economic policies contributed strongly to the weakening of the American economy, growth of the debt, decline of the middle class, skewing in wealth,

and the economic collapse under President George W. Bush. Even if fundamentalists succeed in some issues, such as by limiting personal welfare or by expanding the military budget, to use God as a way to succeed is worse than the original problem. Fundamentalisms' greatest tragedy might be that it missed a chance to do something about problems that really need to be solved.

As a way to gain some perspective, I suggest that fundamentalists learn about real capitalism and how it works rather than parrot slogans about an idealized unrealistic idolatrous version. Find the strengths and weaknesses of real capitalism in the real world. Figure out how to safeguard its strengths. Find out how its weaknesses drive social problems, hurt people, and hurt nature. Consider how the weaknesses can be helped without subverting capitalism itself, human nature, or the state. Understand how the modern American suburban nuclear family, pre-marital sex, divorce, single parents, and mixed families are as much a product of capitalism as cars, toothpaste, and stocks. Come up with ways to solve endemic unemployment, bad employment, and poverty without disrupting families and without making people into junkies of the state. Find out how to give unskilled stupid people jobs without the state supporting a lot of stupid unskilled children. Think what can be done about global climate change under real global capitalism. Think about which of God's command pertain to capitalism and to nature, how to follow God's commands, what it is to break his commands, and what happens when we break them. After fundamentalists have thought through these issues, then they can use their new skills to analyze other issues in the same way.