

15 Common Themes

This chapter describes themes that are common in many religions, in practice if not officially. Most themes imply a stance or come from a stance but I do not go into the relation. The themes are not necessarily mistakes but can lead to mistakes. It is clear when I consider a theme likely to lead to a mistake. I frame these themes in terms of God. Feel free to substitute “Dharma”, Heaven, and “Tao” if that works. Most themes have a basis in evolved human nature. I do not speculate on that here.

Bigger than Me.

Everybody who is sane and has sensitivity feels, at some time, that the world is bigger than him-herself. This feeling is one of the high points of being human.

Some disclaimers: There are differences between the feeling, awareness of it, how we think about it, how we talk about it, and what we do about it. Illogical but true: What we do, feel, think, and say after feeling affects what we feel when we feel. In the human mind, sometimes cause works backwards. Awareness, thinking, and telling depend on: the fact that we evolved, our personality, religion, culture, class, gender, ethnicity, and personal history. People have the feeling of “bigger-than-me” while raccoons likely do not. Christians talk about Jesus or God while Hindus talk about Krishna or Dharma. A bitter person fears the Devil while a happy person loves everyone. One person might enlist in Habitat for Humanity while another might bomb abortion clinics. This section does not sift through these issues. It describes some implications of the fact that people have this feeling.

We likely evolved to have the feeling of bigger-than-me, to have it sometimes, but not too often. People differ in how often and how strong. These facts do not make true or false the idea that there is something bigger than we are, do not make true or false any of the particular forms that the idea comes in, and do not justify or condemn any acts we do on the basis of the feeling.

People who have the feeling almost always describe it as self-validating; they “just know” it is true. This certainty about the feeling likely also evolved as well as simply having the feeling. We have a feeling and we have a feeling of certainty on top of the feeling. The feeling of certainty does not make true or false the idea that there is something bigger than we are. Most people who buy a lottery ticket “just know” they will win, and, eventually, for one-or-a-few people, the feeling is true. We have to judge “bigger-than-me” on criteria other than its own self-assurance, but there are very few clear objective criteria by which to judge it.

Every religion uses the feeling of “bigger-than-me” as evidence to self-validate the religion as a whole. Christians use the feeling of God to validate Christianity and the idea of Jesus as God. Avoid that way. Just because somebody feels “bigger-than-me” and then says the feeling proves that Jesus loves him does not prove Jesus loves him. Just because somebody has the feeling and says Mohammad was the last and greatest of the prophets does not prove it is so.

Just because you have this feeling, and you read something into this feeling, does not mean other people should have the same feeling, or, if they do, they should read into it what you did. As much as you might think the feeling immediately self-validates some idea, such as that cats should rule the world, the feeling does not necessarily self-validate any idea. There are no hard rules for what you should, or should not, get out of the feeling.

It is not a good idea to try to invoke this feeling directly such as by fasting, drugs, extreme ascetics, diets, forced wilderness treks, group activities such as hazing, crazy road trips, political conventions, religious camp meetings, revival meetings, keening in church, going to anthropology conventions, etc. It is a better idea to do other things that are useful anyway, lead to learning, and are friendly to the idea of the bigger-than-me when it comes. Work to save the Alabama barrier islands, and see how you feel. Try to raise the educational level of American children. Try to understand the evolution of the universe. Go hunting without booze or drugs. Tend a garden.

Some particular places, times, or experiences tend to induce this feeling. Some people call this feeling the “Grand Canyon” experience. I used to live by the Columbia River Gorge, and more people have this feeling there than at a strip mall. Some people do have the feeling at a strip mall; I have. Some people have this feeling with art. Some people get the feeling while doing martial arts. I think the feeling is more common at dawn and dusk.

We should not draw too much from where and when we have the feeling. Think why you might have the feeling then and there, or, in contrast, think why then and there are not important and why God is telling you that the feeling transcends that particular situation. Think about messages in the feeling that do not depend on then and there. I used to have this feeling so often, in so many different venues, that I learned to separate the feeling from the venue while still looking at the venue to discover what I could.

While we are sorting out the feeling, we can think about what to do on the basis of the feeling. As long as you do something good, don’t worry about purity of motive much.

Think about how the feeling goes along with ideas that are common in many religions such as that we should “do unto others”, we should be kind to others, we should “pay it forward”, or that all rules apply equally. These ideas do not necessarily need the feeling to validate them, but it is not bad to take the feeling as support for the ideas. If we feel the bigger-than-me wants us to love each other, I see little wrong in that conclusion.

Think about how the feeling goes along with ideas that might be important in your religion but are not in other religions or are not as important in them. Does the feeling ask you to do the will of God without question? Would everybody draw the same conclusion? If doing the will of God leads you to do useful things, then you should probably go ahead. But do not think that everybody should do the will of God as your understand it even if they too have the feeling sometimes. If the feeling leads you to champion your religion without necessarily denigrating other religions, and you do good things as a result, then that result is probably fine as well.

If the feeling leads you to consider something wrong, then you should not do that wrong act. You should wonder why you drew that bad conclusion from the feeling. Leave yourself open to having the feeling

again. If you come to a different better conclusion, then fine. If you come to the same bad inference, then talk to somebody who can guide you to good action.

If the feeling leads you to think, "My religion is right while all other religions are wrong. I should follow my religion vigorously while also suppressing other religions." then you should not follow this train of thought based on this feeling. This thinking is a wrong act. Leave yourself open to the feeling again. If you draw the same conclusion, then talk to somebody who can guide you. Don't go to a religious bigot. You might conclude that your religion is best or that your religion is only one among many but you should not come to that conclusion based on the feeling of bigger-than-me alone.

The feeling of something bigger-than-me is one of the feelings that are common in mysticism. Although related, mysticism is a different topic that should be considered apart from this feeling. You can have this feeling while not having any other mystic feelings and ideas. It is good to have this feeling but not to have most other typical mystic feelings and ideas.

Mysticism and Metaphysics.

Below is an excerpt from "Everyday" by Buddy Holly and the Crickets. If you can, listen to the whole song because it is relevant here. I can't reproduce all of it for fear of copyright issues.

"Every day, it's a gettin' closer
Goin' faster than a roller coaster
Love like yours is sure to come my way"

The bigger-than-me feeling is typical of mystical feelings, and is one of about a dozen common mystical feelings. I don't write much about mystics and mystical feelings because, first, it takes a long time to sort out the topic. Second, most people do little out of mysticism even if they are fascinated by it. Most people know the feeling "we are all one" but really very few people act on that basis no matter how much they applaud it in theory. Third, I am somewhat prone to mystical feelings, and I found they are more of a hindrance than a help. They are useful as a source to get thinking going but they are not a good place to end up. To explain why requires going through a bunch of particular mystic feelings, and that is just what I don't want to do. I go through a couple below.

Contrary to popular misconception, mature major religions do not have much mysticism in them although they all recognize some supposedly mystical truths at their core, such as "Jesus saves", "Mohammad is the last and greatest of the prophets", and "all lives are part of a joyous system". Religions have dogmas and ceremonies now that came out of past mysticism or are related to past mysticism; but their current practices have more to do with success in this world than with mysticism. Mostly, religions bend mystic ideas to validate normal success such as being a merchant or soldier. Formal religions extol mystics in theory but ignore them in practice, as with the Christian John of the Cross or Muslim Rumi. Sometimes, religions kill mystics to silence them as with the Christian Giordano Bruno.

Mystics and scholarly metaphysicians don't often get along. Scholarly Metaphysicians almost always win in the long run. First comes one mystic, then comes a parade of scholarly metaphysicians who use his-her vision to justify their schemes, and so the metaphysicians have the last word. When you end up in

supposed mysticism, what you really end up with is not so much the original mystic insight but a dogma transformed by scholarly metaphysicians. Then we need a second mystic to shed the heavy dogmatic clothing so we can breathe again. Maybe that is why new mystics have to come over and over to say the same things in slightly different words. Common people are better at getting mystical ideas than we give ourselves credit for but we don't always get them. Metaphysicians happily step in to interpret visions for us. Metaphysics can be hard to understand and don't usually have much prestige in themselves. People might not get mystic visions fully but they get them enough so mystic visions are appealing, and mystic visions often have prestige even when people are not clear about what they mean. So, metaphysicians appeal to mysticism for support even when the mysticism is not the real source of their ideas. Dozens of schemes have used the Book of Revelations as justification. A lot of mysticism, and supposed mysticism, comes to us only through metaphysical filters.

"God is love" is a common idea in mysticism. What does it mean? What does it imply for doing? We have no trouble understanding the idea, we just don't believe it applies in simple blanket form, and so we need clarification. Using our desire for clarification, metaphysicians tell us that God created the world through love, and God created the Church through further love. So we should do what the Church says because it is a manifestation of God's love of his creation.

Mystics say, "Everything is connected to everything else. We are all connected to each other. We are all one great big being." The same issues crop up as with "God is love". Metaphysicians pick out which links we really have to pay attention to, and which we have to ignore. They tell us who among the other people are really like us and who are only approximately like us and so can be treated badly.

Jesus gave his disciples bread and wine, and said "This is my body and blood". For reasons that I don't go into, that saying makes sense to me, but not in the terms of any Church doctrine. Instead, a good idea from Jesus has been turned into the touching but unseemly sight of people lined up with open mouths to receive a thimble-full of wine and pinch of bread. The Church idea is supported by bizarre explanations such as "trans-substantiation" and "co-substantiation". If you belong to a church that still holds "communion" in this way then I recommend continuing, but, every once in a while, look at what is going on around you, and think if Jesus intended this.

Mystic Myth and Systems that Eat the World.

Mystics seem to operate apart from most standard religions, and apart from systems that eat the world. To the extent they recognize such standard religions and systems, they seem to jump away from them. Yet standard religions are able to co-op mysticism, largely by incorporating mystic vision into their version of a system that eats the world. Metaphysicians are amazingly adept at using mystic visions to bolster religious systems that eat the world. Mystic visions are often contradictory and fragmented. Religious scholars use those pieces to create the "splotches" in a world-eating system onto which people project what they need. Mysticism can provide the hole in the center. Then metaphysicians identify the hole in the center with cosmic principles that are useful to them such as Joy, Salvation, Buddha Mind, Dharma, God, and Emptiness. If we think of Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God as a mystic vision, and the idea of Jesus saving people as a mystic idea, then this is what happened in Christianity. If we think of "awakening", the everyday world and the awakened world, "emptiness", and "Buddha mind" as mystic ideas, then this happened with Mahayana Buddhism.

The transformation of mystic ideas in this form as part of systems that eat the world is a big mistake, and leads us to overlook the value of visions. A person can have mystic visions without the visions leading to ideas of God's Descent, Suffusing the World, the ultimate unity of all beings, and Ascent. I don't know what to do to correct the mistake.

A Small Attack on the Critics of Mystics.

It is easy to make fun of mystic feelings. Not even most mystics think the world as a whole can run along the ideas that mystics have. All sane people know we cannot run the world according to ideas such as "love one another more than you love yourselves" and "we are all one, we are all equally children of God" even if those ideas are true. Right Wing Reactionaries of the 1980s and after had an easy time attacking the silly simple quasi-mystic ideas of the 1960s and 1970s, even as reactionaries tacitly injected ideas of their own that were just as impossible, such as an idealized free market.

Especially if you can see how odd mystic ideas are, but you are not a mystic, and you have never had a good jolt of mystic feelings, then it is better not to indulge in criticizing mystics; it is better to be quiet. If you see how the world cannot run according to mystic idealism, but you cannot supply a practical sound alternative along which the world can run much better, then it is better to be quiet. People who make fun of mystics usually are not criticizing mysticism so much as trying to puff up themselves. It is not enough to see how mystics are silly or impractical, you have to do better. If you can do better, then you will tend less to criticize mystics than to offer better plans without the criticism. Do that instead.

We need mystics and their impossible idealism. Without them, we would have none of the major world religions, and we would have no democracy. We also need to know that most of the world cannot run according to simply mystic feelings. Your job is to appreciate mysticism and practicality, and to come up with a compromise that actually works and that leads us to better humanity.

Heaven on Earth; It is All as It Should Be; It's All Good.

The feeling of "heaven on Earth" is similar to the feeling "everything is alright, everything is as it should be, I wouldn't change a thing, not even the bad stuff, and not even my stupid mistakes". We get that feeling sometimes at the end of our lives or after a big, often tragic, event. I separate the two feelings when needed but here mostly I take them as the same.

When most people think of heaven, they think of this world with only the good parts and without any of the bad parts: eating cake and ice cream all the time without getting fat; having sex without worrying about babies or commitment; having sex is always a mystical union forged in physical terms like a sacrament, and never just one person screwing another; love without heartbreak; adventure without dying; your team always wins with a last-minute score; every weekend you have a happy tailgate party; every fall you get your quota of deer; you find a great deal at the mall; you come up with the idea that unifies all physics; you find the key to the evolution of social behavior; all children are above average; all men are braver and taller than average; all women are prettier and make more money than average; and it all goes on and on without anybody ever getting any older and without getting bored.

We see this idea of heaven in Celtic stories of running off to fairy land or in the idea of Lake Wobegon. David Byrne captures the feeling in the Talking Heads' song named rightly enough "Heaven". Heaven is a place where each kiss is exactly like the first kiss. "Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens." If the same thing happens equally well always, then nothing ever happens. In fancier words, another way to see Byrne's line is "nothingness happens all the time". The song is both "straight ahead" and satirical.

Aside from logical problems – all the children are smarter than average – this heaven would get boring soon enough. I discussed the problem of boredom in the chapters on issues and I return to it later in the chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism. What do you do after you come up with the idea that unifies all physics once and for all time? What people really want is a place with some real risk but no real damage. They want the thrill without the true Great Risk of life. We can get hurt but we always heal even if we remember the pain. We want some risk and pain. We want the right amount of risk and pain. You are a race car driver; there is a terrible wreck on the track; two of your best friends die; their families are grief-stricken; but you get away with only a few burns and a broken leg; you have scars, but you can, and will, race again; and you contribute heavily to the fund that supports the families of your dead friends for their whole lives. Your girlfriend cheats on you with your best friend but, after a few years, you make a new best friend and find a woman who is true. Heaven on Earth is a continuing adventure. In the first movie of the "Matrix" trilogy, Agent Smith tells Morpheus that the machines created the first matrix as a paradise for humans rather than the sordid gritty world of 1990; but humans were unhappy because their primitive brains craved adventure; so that world failed; and the machines had to make other matrix-lands with hardship and striving. In the novel "Brave New World", the World Controllers tried making the island of Crete into an isolated egalitarian paradise but the people there ruined it with their striving and conniving. The debased world of difference, ranks, striving, and conniving better fits human nature.

We want this real scary world here to be the heavenly world of continuing beauty, goodness, manageable risk, and near-certain success. We want to turn badness and ugliness to good use. This yearning adds to the visions, dogma, and practice of major religions; I do not spell out how here. I share this desire, and I have felt that this world might somehow be that world. I have wanted this world to be heaven on Earth. But I had to conclude that this world is not heaven on Earth and it is not the case that everything is as it should be.

Strictly speaking, the only way to have heaven on Earth as ongoing beauty and adventure is to have a system of multiple lives in which we forget the details of our past lives. If we always survive the car crash, yet our friends always die, and then we make new friends, then, sooner or later, we figure it out, and the world gets boring again. Sometimes we have to be the one who dies. But, then, for heaven on Earth to be really real, to continue, we have to be born again. We have to share in both the good and bad. We have to have both good lives and bad lives. This vision of heaven on Earth is another version of God forgetting himself so as to dream the world, in which God takes on the identity of individual persons in his dream. In previous chapters, I denied a system of many lives, God forgetting himself to dream the world, or God becoming us so that really we each are God. So I can't accept this version of heaven on Earth.

Still this idea of heaven on Earth is appealing. People look for the right balance of risk and reward on this Earth, hope they have found it, and hope that means this Earth is really heaven.

Most people don't get the feeling of heaven on Earth from logic or from a system of many lives. Most people get the feeling from an overwhelming experience of beauty-and-rightness. Even people who live in a system of many lives such as Hinduism or Buddhism likely don't get the feeling that this world is really a heaven on Earth from the idea of many lives but get the feeling first through a direct sense of beauty-and-rightness, and then the feeling of beauty, the idea of many lives, and the idea that this world is really a heaven on Earth, all support each other.

Mystics often see this world as surpassingly beautiful. Not everybody can fully share this mystic vision of this world but most people catch a glimpse at sometime. They catch a big enough glimpse, often enough, so they can get the sense of heaven on this Earth right now. I have had the feeling many times, in many places, for a long time many times, so I know better than to try to describe it.

When we have a feeling of incredible beauty-and-rightness about the world, we overcome what is bad and ugly about this world. We assimilate good and bad, beautiful and ugly, together into a higher beauty-and-rightness. We do not overlook the bad and ugly, they just don't matter as much, and we can see goodness and beauty in them too. A starving great painter who will not be discovered until long after he-she is dead, and who dies in despair, is as beautiful as a talented great painter who makes it in his-her lifetime; the life of Van Gogh was as beautiful as the life of Rembrandt. A songwriter hack with many hits of pop crap is as beautiful as the great songwriter who only has a minor hit; Tin Pan Alley is as beautiful as Townes Van Zandt, Warren Zevon, Alex Chilton, or Joni Mitchell. The bum lying in the alley besides Carnegie Hall is as beautiful in his-her own way as the great pianist playing inside tonight. In the movie "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly", the bad would be as much appreciated as the Good or the Ugly.

The world is not more beautiful-and-right despite its badness, ugliness, and heartaches but because of them. The world is not necessarily heaven on Earth because it all turns out well in the end, although, if it does all turn out well in the end, that is better. The world is heaven on Earth whether it all turns out well in the end or not. Badness, ugliness, and heartache make the world much more interesting, whether it all turns out well or not, whether we are in a system of many lives or not. Badness, ugliness, and heartache make the world full and round. Their value does not come because we need a contrast with goodness and beauty, so we can better appreciate standard goodness and beauty; ugliness and badness are part of it too; they are good and beautiful too in their own way. Cruelty by the shrike adds as much goodness and beauty as parental love by penguins. Drug abuse is as much a part of beauty as penicillin. A serial killer is as worthwhile to the world as a Scout leader. Faking love to get sex is just as good-and-beautiful as faking sex to get love, and both are just as good-and-beautiful as honest simple sex or true love. If you get cancer and will die for sure, it is bad but it is alright. The small minority of abusive priests is just as good and beautiful as the vast majority who work hard in obscurity for community benefit. If you lose your life savings to a Ponzi scheme, that is alright. Getting brutally raped and then contracting HIV and AIDS is just as good and beautiful as falling in love, raising a family, and growing old together. Without ugliness and badness, the world would be much less beautiful and good. This is how we find the balance between the right amount of beauty and ugliness, by assimilating the ugliness and badness. If ever once you feel this deeply, you can never quite get over the feeling. If you feel it several times, it haunts you. This idea lies behind "Lake Wobegon" but there the threats there are much milder and much easier to assimilate to goodness-in-the-end.

People who have this feeling only in glimpses use it to rationalize their lives and the modest badness and ugliness of their lives. I am not “putting them down”. What they do is normal and helpful. They use this feeling to make the world seem as good as it can be so they can do as well as possible.

When we can see this world right here right now on planet Earth this way, then we can think our world is a heaven on Earth, and that all planets, in their own ways too, might be heavens in the universe. We can think God did give us heaven if only we would open our eyes to see it in the right way, and God gives us many chances to open our eyes the right way. The banquet is all right here. The joy of a grand system is all right here. Once a person has this feeling, he-she forever looks at this world right now differently even if the feeling cannot be sustained.

Despite having the spirit of infinite beauty sitting on my shoulder whispering in my ear, I have come to see that this world is not heaven on Earth. Things are not just as they should be. There is too much evil of the wrong kind. Some evil cannot be assimilated. We cannot explain away all evil even if we embed it in a system of many lives; and I don't want that path anyhow. Some evil is too evil to be good, and too ugly to be beautiful. Some ugliness is too ugly to be beautiful. I might see a robbery as beautiful but I cannot see child abuse as beautiful. I might see war as glorious but I cannot see turning ten-year-old children into soldiers and camp prostitutes as beautiful. I can appreciate a brave person dying while climbing a mountain but not a child dying of long slow cancer. I know God can turn horrible evil into great good but even God cannot cancel all evil, and, in fact, much evil does not turn into good. I have seen this world as a heaven on Earth, and I have tried to sustain my vision; now I can screw myself up to see this world as heaven but I can no longer do it naturally or sustain it for long. So I am left with this real world mixed as it is, and I have to figure out what to do in the face of beauty, goodness, badness, and ugliness.

If we don't see this world as “heaven on Earth”, if we don't think everything already is as it should be, then we should feel a duty to work to make things better. A person who does see “heaven on Earth” also sees the feeling and involvement of “do gooders” as part of the total package in which we altogether do have “heaven on Earth” and “everything is as it should be”. The “do gooders” are as necessary as the indecent criminals, both are needed, and both contribute equally to the end result of “heaven on Earth” and “it is all as it should be”. Our feeling in doing good and fighting evil is part of what makes this place heaven on Earth. If all people everywhere felt this world were bad and stopped trying, then maybe the place would not be heaven on Earth. But, as long as some people see the need and keep trying, then the world is still heaven on Earth, and the people who try to change what can't be changed too are part of what makes it heaven. I understand this “re-contextualizing”, this “new and bigger framing”, but I disagree. The good and bad are not equal, equally necessary, and together make this world heaven and together make it all as it should be. At some point, you have to stop re-framing and have to take things as they appear. Then you have to decide if what you see is heaven and is exactly as it should be. Despite having the feeling, I decided this Earth was not heaven.

Mystics might say my inability to see the world as all-beautiful all the time is my fault. I am not mystic enough. I do not go deep, far, or long enough. I don't know how to respond to the charge other than to report what I see. This world is as it is for me.

To argue this topic more is not useful. Here, you either see these points or you do not. To argue more is to re-argue the problem of evil, and that topic has its own chapter.

The Humongous Sanctity of All Life.

John Lennon: "I am of the Universe, and you know what it's worth".

I wish everybody could have a deep long feeling of the value of all life, how wrong it is to hurt any living creature, how much we should help all life, and how much we should love all life. This feeling is in all major religions although usually, except for Christianity and some versions of Hinduism, this feeling is not the central teaching. Even though it is not the central teaching of the founders, mystics in all religions have had this feeling, and the great teachers of all religions have tried to weave it in to the core teachings of the religion. Few people, of any religion, live up to it.

It is easy to criticize this feeling and to make fun of it. Without exception, the people I have met and read who make fun of this feeling have never really had it. Everyone has twitches of this feeling and glimpses of the truth that lies behind it, but few people really have it. Rather than wisely criticizing something that they understand, the people who make fun of this feeling make fun of it as a defense against how it would change their lives if they took it seriously. Don't make fun of what you don't understand.

A few people who have this feeling try to really live by it. They cannot live ordinary lives. A few people who have this feeling try to do as best they can and try to teach it to other people. They can succeed partially but not fully. I wish them well. What I say here applies to them only obliquely.

The majority of people have this feeling a little bit, but only a little bit, because we can't live by this feeling and we can't expect other people to have this feeling and to live by it. Maybe natural selection made sure that most of us can have this feeling only a little bit.

Animal life cannot run according to this feeling. Human life cannot run according to this feeling. If life is sacred as in this feeling, and life goes on apart from this feeling, and life has to go on anyway, then the sanctity that is captured by this feeling cannot be all that is going on. Even if you have this feeling deeply, perhaps especially if you have this feeling deeply, you want life to go on, and you want life to go on as it should, then you need also to see that most life has to carry on apart from this feeling. Tigers and deer are both sacred but tigers still eat deer. Humans are sacred but flesh-eating bacteria still kill children. You have to see that people need to develop other feelings and ideas apart from this feeling. You should encourage people to develop other feelings and other ideas to live by well, and you should not worry too much about accord of other ideas with your sense of the preciousness of all life. You should encourage people to develop moral and wise ideas.

People who make fun of this feeling without understanding it use the fact that people-who-do-have-this-feeling-know-that-not-all-of-us-can-live-by-this-feeling to bolster making fun of this feeling. People who make fun of this feeling agree on a superficial level with people who have had this feeling and who are wiser than they are. So they take superficial agreement as ratification of their own shallow wisdom and of their right to make fun of this feeling. They should stop doing that.

If you have this feeling and want to live by it, then I salute you. But don't think you automatically know all that is going on and automatically can advise other people how to live. Use the sensitivity that this feeling

gives you as energy to help as much as you can, including helping other people who do not know this feeling and cannot live by it.

“Everything is beautiful in its own way”.

I forgot who sang that. “Everything” includes things, events, and situations. This feeling is like the feeling that all life is sacred. This feeling is true but only partly true, and the false part fully undermines the true part. Just because everything is beautiful does not mean we should cherish and support everything. We have to choose. For life to go on, life has to nourish some things while letting go of other things and while actively putting down yet others. You can see beauty in a thing yet still not nourish it or can still actively put it down. Crime can be beautiful but I refuse to nourish it and I will put it down. Cholera is beautiful in its own way but I refuse to tolerate it – I know because I had a serious vibrio infection. Tsunamis can be beautiful but I wish they would avoid coastal villages full of children. Tigers killing deer is beautiful but also ugly, and we hope tigers do not kill more deer than they can eat and do not kill young healthy pretty deer. What about your pet cat killing that mockingbird baby in the apple tree? Passive aggression might be beautiful in its own way but I dislike it anyhow. Is rape so pretty that we wish to support it?

To return to John Lennon: “Yellow matter custard dripping from a dead dog’s eye”.

It would be better if only the people who deeply appreciate the beauty of all things chose what to nourish, not to nourish, or to put down. Presumably they would make the best decisions. People who do not have this feeling, people who have this feeling only a little, and people who mock it, likely make mistakes. But even that plan won’t work. We can’t wait for everybody to have this feeling deeply for life to go on and for people to make choices.

If you have this feeling, then you need to put up with the fact that not all beautiful things can be saved, and that normal crude people make choices about what to save, what to discard, and what to put down. Once you accept this situation, then your own feeling for the beauty of all life, all things, and all events is enhanced rather than diminished. Try to rest in the satisfaction of knowing that. When normal people don’t feel they have to see and appreciate the beauty of everything, they are better at seeing the beauty of, and cherishing, some good things.

“Seek and You Will Find; Knock and the Door Will Be Opened for You”.

Jesus said that. Other people in other religions say similar things. Muslims believe God helps people who sincerely believe and who are open to having their eyes opened. Taoists believe the Tao will find them if they seek it, and then they can live in accord with the Tao.

This feeling is not the same as the feeling that everything will turn out right and well. This feeling is not the same as divine providence. The three feelings often go together, and I do not sort them out here. I do comment on the feeling of divine providence below. What I have to say in this section applies to that feeling as well. This feeling of “seek and you will find” is not the same as having all the answers or being able to explain evil. It is not the same as “heaven on Earth” or “everything is as it should be”. This feeling can be misused to serve the feeling of “heaven on Earth” but it should not be misused that way.

Rather, this feeling is that, if we open ourselves up to God (Dharma, Tao, the Universe, Mind, etc.) then we can put things in perspective, see how much or how little we matter, see how little most problems are, see what is important, see connections that we did not see before, see how important it is to work with goodness, see what we can contribute and cannot contribute, and we can explain better to other people. Things do not have to all turn out right and well. We can understand most of the time when things do not turn out all right, and we can cope most of the time. We can learn to see opportunities for enjoyment and for spiritual success, and we learn to take them. We just “get it” better. We “get it” enough. We can live by what we get. When stated in this way, it sound obvious and trivial, but, in fact, few people ever open themselves up to “get it” in this way, and few people ever “get it” well enough.

The real question is why we so often “get it” when we open ourselves up to “getting it”. The standard answer in theistic religions is God reaches down to help us out. The standard answer in non-theistic religions is: the world is Mind (Dharma); we are part of the Mind; because we made the world, we can figure out how it works; when we open ourselves up to Mind, then we see what we are part of, and we “get it”. To me, the two answers are similar. Both see God or the system intervening to help those who wheedle up a special relation. Both are wrong.

Instead, I think something like this: What you seek and find is not wealth, power, or family success. You seek and find spiritual adeptness. God does not reach down to help each of us in particular to “get it”. We are not the local manifestation of the great system that is the world. When God made the world, he made it so that people who do relax a little, who do seek, who open themselves up a little, can find much of what they seek. We can find enough most of the time even if we don't find it all. We can find enough when we learn to recognize enough. That does not mean we have to lower our sites to be happy with whatever meager crumbs come our way. It means we learn to recognize that we cannot have the whole world and that we are adept at getting a lot. God set it up this way. All we have to do is go along with what God already set up. The world is scary and dangerous but it is also wonderful, good, and a lot of fun. If we go along with what we can, take a few chances, and deal with the dangers that are within our power, then we learn enough to go on. God is happy that we take advantage of what he set up for us, but God does not re-arrange creation so every seeker gets all the answers or that creation ensures success for each particular person in his-her own particular desires. You do not learn how to cure your brother's cancer just because you want to learn and you go on the Internet. If you are a medical researcher, and you work hard, then you can contribute a small part to helping cure cancer for other people; that amount is enough. You do not write the Great American Novel just because you want to but you might write some good stories along the way. You might not reform all of Christianity but, with a lot of scholarship and hard work, you might help a few people clear their heads, and you might clear your own head too. That is all I can say.

Hell on Earth.

From “Paint It Black” and “Flight 505” by the Rolling Stones:

“I see a red door; I must have it painted black
No colors anymore; I want them to turn black
I see the girls go by dressed in their summer clothes
I must turn my head until my darkness goes”

“He put the plane down in the sea,
The end of flight number 5-0-5”

Listen also to “Behind Blue Eyes” by Pete Townshend and The Who.

The idea that this world is really hell on Earth might be related to depression and other mental issues. I have had deep dark depressions that lasted years, so I get a sense of how the two go together. Yet you can decide the world is really hell on Earth without being depressed, and you can be depressed but still know this world is not hell on Earth. Likewise, you can feel that humanity ultimately will fall far short of our potential, and we will ruin this world, and yet still not feel this world is hell. You can feel we will achieve a lot of material success, and still decide this world is hell. I do not sort out the issues here. Again, I merely describe some points about the feeling.

The idea that this world is really hell is akin to the vision of a greatly fallen Earth from Christian, Muslim, Gnostic, Manichaeism, Dualistic, and similar mythology. Everything stinks. People never do anything right. People can't do anything right. It is already bad and getting worse. All that people do on their own, without God, is evil. Good only comes into this world through God; and that not very often. All this is wrong.

I am not sure if this way of seeing is an inversion of seeing this world as heaven on Earth. I am not sure if the two views share some brain chemistry. The two visions can go together, as in some Buddhism and Hinduism, but I do not go into that topic here. When Buddhism sees this world as not worthwhile, that is not the same as seeing this world as irretrievably bad, as hell on Earth.

This view of seeing the world as fallen, ugly, and bad is more wrong than seeing this world as heaven on Earth. To see this world as hell on Earth, you have to willfully blind yourself to overlook all the goodness here. You have to make yourself see the world blackly whereas the image of the world as heaven on Earth comes of itself. I understand sometimes being overcome by evil but I do not accept wallowing in it, and I do not accept pushing that vision onto other people. (I am not talking of people with depression, bipolarity, or other illness. That is a separate question.)

People who see the world as entirely fallen, bad, and ugly differ in an important way from people who see the world as heaven on Earth. People who see the world as beautiful do not often try to manipulate other people to act as they wish. They do not use other people. At worst, they encourage other people to act well, kindly, and, sometimes, stupidly. People who see the world as bad, ugly, and fallen do try to control other people. Bad visionaries get people to act as they wish for the benefit of the bad visionaries. They instill guilt and ugliness into the hearts of others. They do not encourage other people to act with simple kindness and decency. They offer elaborate schemes for redeeming the world in which they play a big role. Luckily, because they are wrong, we don't have to pay attention to them.

We do have to pay attention to common sense about the badness and ugliness of this world. We can do that without getting carried away.

Imagination.

From the song “Imagination” by Johnny Burke and Jimmy Van Heusen:

“Imagination is funny,
It makes a cloudy day sunny
Makes a bee think of honey,
Just as I think of you”

Although some of the themes described in this chapter lead to mistakes, they are still fun. We should not be afraid of our imaginations. Imagination is fun and natural, and we should enjoy it as long as we do not abuse it. If we deny imagination, we get sick. We can imagine what is exaggerated, false, unrealistic, or misleading, such as witchcraft, sorcery, magic, dragons, and conspiracies – and that is not usually bad. We personify ideas such as demons to represent selfishness and lust for power, or magical beasts to represent goodness such as the luck dragon of “The Never Ending Story”. We get lost in imagination for a while as when a star ship goes faster than the speed of light or as in video games where actions break many laws of physics.

We should suspect ideologies that require us to stifle imagination, such as atheism that insists there is no God, or zealotry that insists it knows all about God and we must follow its ideas.

Eventually we have to return to reality. We should know about the laws of physics that get broken on TV and in movies. We need a sense for what kind of beings can really evolve or not. We should know which institutions really work or don’t work. We should know that the happy utopia is not real and that we can’t model our own government on it. We should know that most demons are really people pushed to a bad place. As long as we do this, then we are fine.

Not Leading to Being Useful.

Buddhists classify ideas in ways besides the usual true and false. We can assess an idea by how useful it is in mental-spiritual progress. Some ideas might be important if we could decide true or false, but we have a hard time judging them true or false, such as the existence of heaven and free will. We can waste much time and energy on ideas that we can’t decide. Pursuing those Ideas obstructs the pursuit of other more useful ideas. The ideas of salvation and heaven get in the way of following Jesus. When we run into a not-decidable-worrisome-obstructive idea, we should stop thinking about it and instead get on to more useful ideas.

Buddhists label not-decidable-worrisome-obstructive ideas as “not leading to enlightenment”. C.S. Lewis told the character Eustace (“Useless”) in “Voyage of the Dawn Treader” to be useful instead of annoying and useless. That is what we need of ideas. The Christian version of this attitude toward ideas might be “by their fruits you will know them”. An American version of this attitude toward ideas is “Pragmatism”, which took inspiration from the Christian attitude. Sometimes to chew on not-decidable ideas can be fun, and even useful, but, until you get a taste for the game, be wary.

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Good Wins

Please see Chapter Five, the second chapter on issues. Like love, sweets, beauty, and a strong arm, goodness compels us. Morality has power. Goodness has power both through its intrinsic goodness (its logic) and because we evolved to feel the appeal of morality just as we evolved to feel the appeal of ripe berries and a well-shaped young person. If morality did not have power to appeal, then morality would not have endured in our evolutionary history. In addition, often as a result of both its intrinsic and evolved appeals, goodness is able to muster physical force, as when individuals and nations fight for good. So goodness has three kinds of power: intrinsic, evolved appeal, and the ability to muster force.

Most people and religions want goodness to win and to prevail in the world. Ideally, good should be able to win only because it is good, based only on what is right, only on intrinsic appeal. In practice, good has to use evolved appeal, and good has to be backed up by physical force from people who can sense and assess good and bad, right and wrong.

Goodness matters, it is important. Mohandas (“Mahatma”) Gandhi, among many people, felt goodness would conquer all in the long run; goodness had appeal in itself based on its goodness alone, the appeal of goodness was qualitatively different than other evolved appeals such as for sex and fatty food; and good would conquer only through its intrinsic appeal as good, and not by its evolved “sweetness” or by use of force. Gandhi distrusted any victory of goodness that needed force. If people do not voluntarily go along with good for its own sake, then they will not go along with good for long. When force is removed, they return to self-interest even if it is not bad self-interest. If good wins in the end through physical force, then good did not win, power won. A victory by good that is not based on good alone is tainted and is not really good. If good wins because it has more evolved appeal than other tastes, if good wins because it is “sweeter” than sex, then good did not win, sweetness won. When good tastes less sweet, then people find another candy such as Romanticism, justification, salvation, martyrdom, nationalism, glamour, or bravery. All this is why Gandhi insisted on non-violent civil action. He insisted that people who disobey the law believe in non-violence and goodness in themselves, and that they do not use non-violence only as a tactic. Gandhi insisted on honesty. If you believe in force to serve good, it is better to act honestly on the basis of force than to use non-violence as a “front”. If you do good for the sake of honor, then seek honor instead and hope that good comes along. If you do good because it feels good, then eat a big dinner instead. The novel “The Once and Future King” is a long fun meditation on doing good for the sake of good, and whether that can lead to the victory of good in a real human world, and can lead to a good government.

It is too hard to separate the evolved appeal of goodness from other evolved appeals such as for sex and chocolate. I focus on the play between goodness and physical force and “power”.

If people want good to win even if it needs to be backed by force, then they also want to be on the side of good, participate in the victory of goodness, and affect the outcome. People want to feel on the side of good, want to feel they fight for good, and want to feel that they participate in a power that brings victory to goodness. To feel all this is to feel good in both senses of the word. If we think we can win, and likely can win, then we are more likely to act on what we think matters, and we are more likely to get personally involved.

Ironically, in many ways, it is better if we think good-likely-will-win-but-are-not-sure than if we know for sure that good will win or lose. If we know for sure good will win, we tend to get lazy, and then we act as if neither good matters nor our participation matters. In that case, we personally lose even if good wins for everybody else. If we feel good will lose, we tend to despair, and then good definitely will lose. If the question is unresolved, we keep hope, we keep active, and good stands a better chance of winning.

Not all people despair when they think good really might lose. A hard fight for good in the face of evil can matter as much as good itself; it is part of goodness. This is a theme of Norse mythology, and it is what J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis tried to get across in their fiction. This is not self-indulgent martyrdom. It comes of facing the truth, realizing what your convictions are, realizing where your convictions lead, and going there anyway. It is what drives resistance movements, such as the French resistance. It is what drives genuine good-at-heart guys to stick to their codes.

If we think good matters and we want people to commit to fighting for good, the best scenario seems to be much like what most of us think we already have: Good is slowly winning, with a lot of setbacks. The final victory of good is not yet foreseeable but it is imaginable. We achieve little victories that add up to real progress. Evil wins sometimes too but usually we can overcome the victories of evil. As we fight for good, we also become better people. I doubt the world is really like this but I wish it were.

Suppose good will never finally win or lose, evil will never finally win or lose, and that things never really do get better or worse. We only think they get better because we try hard to make them better and only when we try hard to make them better. We only think things will get worse if we stop trying to make them better. We live in an illusion that makes us happy even through most hardship. Suppose this situation was all set up by a supreme intelligence for the sake of us and-or for the amusement of itself. This world is much as with the metaphysical cosmological interpretation in the Bhagavad Gita. Part of the joy of the world is continually overcoming a never-ending different set of serious but manageable problems. Even in this case, striving for good still matters; and we still have to appreciate selves and the growth of selves in the striving for good. We also have to appreciate the cunning of the powerful being, and wonder about his-her final motive for selves and the world.

Even though, like Gandhi, great thinkers have insisted we not see morality as having force like the force in sex, normal people do see morality this way. Morality has power based on the fact that the ability for it evolved. We feel morality as an appeal among others such as the desire for food, sex, and wealth. It makes sense to ask how powerful morality is compared to other evolved appeals. It makes sense to ask if the power of morality will win in the long run. This is like asking if good will win in the long run but phrased not in terms of its intrinsic appeal but in terms of the power of its evolved appeal. If morality has evolved appeal, and morality is worth working for, then it is worth using the evolved appeal of morality to win even if to do so is not ideally pure. Go ahead and mix appeals to family and bravery with the call to goodness. If morality has more power, then it will win in the long run, otherwise another more powerful tendency might win.

We can say morality wins in some situations while other forces win out in other situations. Morality wins when we help out a neighbor in public while lust wins when we seduce the neighbor's spouse in private. This view is certainly true and it does allow us to avoid the issue of which is the most powerful tendency

overall. But this resolution still leads us to think of morality in terms of power rather than in terms of pure goodness, and it does not tell us if we should be on the side of good generally.

I understand moral purity and I understand Gandhi's mistrust of other forces such as evolved appeal and well-meaning force. Yet purity is hard to achieve, sometimes we have to take our chances with a mix of motive, and sometimes we have to accept victories based on mixed forces. If morality wins through power, is that outcome always so bad? When morality wins through force, has power always won in the same sense as if a tyrant took over the world? Isn't James Bond really a better option than the criminals who want to rule the world? Is it impossible that power serve goodness? Thinkers other than Gandhi have decided that practical victory it is not always so bad. You can help goodness without totally tainting it and without having people lapse back into selfish badness. In the real human world, sometimes that is the best we can do. That is why we fight just wars.

I think goodness is not likely to win completely in the end. Certainly it will not win just because it is good. Bad will not win decisively either. Rather, we will have a planet lacking in grace but full of normal selfish people, annoying compromise, many transient material goods, natural degradation, and conflict based on class, ethnicity, nation, and belief. This outcome does not mean good is not good in itself, good is not good enough, good-and-evil-need-each-other-forever, fighting for good despite inevitable evil is Romantically heroically grand, we should not fight for good because fighting for good taints good, and we should not fight for good because good will not win decisively. This outcome does mean the evolved appeal of good is not strong enough compared to the appeals of wealth, toys, stuff, sex, reproduction, power, food, appearance, etc. Good is good, it is worth fighting for, enjoy the appeal of good, enjoy victories when you get them, and be sure it will be much worse if you do not fight for good.

The Next New Israel.

This idea applies mostly to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but it also applies to other religions enough. I come back to this idea. Almost all nations and religions see themselves as so special that they deserve permanent privilege and they have the right to lead morally and physically. This is not true. No group is that special now. All groups have qualities that deserve attention and sometimes deserve emulation. Some groups are good in many ways and so deserve consideration, such as successful democracies and economies, and societies that take care of the planet. But no group is so special that it deserves to be the unequivocal leader of the world and is the obvious favorite of God.

The idea of being really special got a boost in the West with Israel, which considered itself chosen by God, morally superior to other societies, likely to be militarily superior, and destined for moral and political leadership of the world. Whether that was true of ancient Israel, I do not say. When Christianity took over from Judaism, it took over the idea of itself as like Israel but extending beyond the boundaries of any particular nation state. When Islam became powerful, it thought of itself in these terms even if it did not call itself the new Israel. When particular nations became powerful in Christianity or Islam, they thought of themselves in particular as the new Israel, as, for example, England in its colonial crest and Iraq under the caliphs. As the United States got economically and militarily powerful, Christians thought of it as the new Israel destined to be the moral and military leader of the world and the instrument of God. They still do, and their ideas cause much mischief. Sometimes Egypt and Saudi Arabia think of themselves as the new Israel, and look to God to give them power. Although it does not think in terms of Judaic religion,

China now thinks of itself as the new Israel which will dominate the world first economically, then militarily, and finally morally. If India rises far enough economically, it will develop a similar ideology put in Hindu terms. No nation or religion is the new Israel. Nations and religions should stop this rhetoric.

In the Jewish Tanakh (Old Testament), The Ark of the Covenant is a special box in which the tablets with the Ten Commandments reside. Only special people can touch it. In Ark lore, Israel cannot be defeated if it carries the Ark into battle. In the movie "Raiders of the Lost Ark" (Indiana Jones 1), Hitler wanted the Ark partly as a way to insure victory. At the end of the movie, the Ark is stored in a vast warehouse, the property of the United States. The United States and its allies won the war. Although the movie probably didn't intend to do so, the movie unconsciously promoted the idea that there is a New Israel and that the United States is the current New Israel. This idea is wrong but the fact that it fits in so well with the movie shows how accepted the idea is. You should not feel guilty about enjoying a great adventure movie just because it accidentally promotes a widespread wrong idea.

If the current Israel is the continuation of the old Israel and so destined to become the moral and religious leader of the world, I cannot say. I doubt it.

Thinking this way goes along with being powerful. It is part of using morality as a tool of power. It can help power to arise and can help maintain power. That does not mean it is right. In fact, it more likely means this way of thinking is wrong.

Divine Intervention.

Divine intervention is a good example of an idea that appealing but not useful. The real question is not whether there is intervention but whether divine intervention makes any difference in what matters, what is worthwhile, and how we act. I assume God intervenes very little but he might intervene a bit. If God intervenes a little, it is not enough to count on. God does not change the basic Big Real Risk of the world. I can't think of any intervention that changes what matters, what is worthwhile, or what we should do.

However much God might intervene, there is not enough intervention so we can count on God to set it all straight for us. God will not make the world uniformly good, and will not make it worthwhile for everybody. Even if there has been a lot of divine intervention, it has not changed the basic character of the world, and the world seems to be now much as for the last several thousand years. I assume that will continue to be so until we play around massively with our DNA.

It is reasonable to say that God "sent" important prophets such as Jesus, Mohammad, Moses, the writers of the Upanishads, the Buddha, Confucius, and Chuang Tzu. I might include Newton, Gauss, Darwin, Einstein, more scientists, some artists, and some philosophers such as David Hume. We might include a few politicians such as Jefferson and Franklin.

Despite having sent prophets, the basic character of the world still seems much the same. The game is the same. It is odd that God would send us teachers us but not send us enough teachers to change the basic game. To send enough prophets to change the basic character of the world is not to take away free will any more than making sure we have quality teachers in good schools takes away free will from children. If God did not intend to change the basic character of the world through sending prophets, then

it is not clear why he sent them. It confuses the situation to intervene almost not at all, intervene a little through the prophets, but not really intervene enough to change the basic game. Maybe the prophets did change the basic game enough for God's purposes but I don't see it. Maybe sending the prophets was the good education that some of us needed but could not get on our own. We do not expect school to change the basic game of society but we do expect it to help the students who are open to its lessons. Certainly I have gained from the prophets.

Whether from direct divine intervention or otherwise, we often feel as if we are guided into seeing more, being a better person, and following a better path. "Seek and you will find; knock and the door will open for you". I think we are guided, but not by direct divine intervention. If we don't refuse to learn the lessons of life, if we do open our eyes and ears just a little, then we do become better. People who grew up in theist religions believe this is because directly God guides them in particular and in detail. For the overwhelming majority of cases, I don't think that is true. Instead, I think God set up the world so that it would teach us, much like a good teacher sets up an interactive computer education system so that it teaches receptive students. God set up the world so that it would be our teacher. This is indirect divine intervention. With it, there is little need of direct divine intervention, and so I see almost no cases that I would call direct divine intervention. When we feel we are being guided and learning from life, we are, but not because God is doing it directly. Of course, an atheist can argue that this ability of this world is an accidental feature of this world, and might not be true in other worlds. I cannot say for sure about other worlds. I think it strains rationality to see how much we can learn in this world if we are not stubborn and to think that is not a design feature of this world.

If God does intervene to help people, it cannot be because the person is worthy or because the cause is worthy. If God does intervene to help people because the person is worthy or the cause is worthy, then there is no system to it that I can understand, and I have never read any account that I can accept. Too many worthy people and causes go unaided. If God aided worthy people, then no child would ever get cancer or be forced into sex slavery. No evil dictator would ever win a battle, no corrupt lobbyist would ever get a bill through Congress, and no PAC would ever elect a candidate. If God aided right causes, good nations would never fall to bad nations, and people would give to charity instead of pissing away their money on debt, booze, bad politics, and gambling. There would never have been a Holocaust of the Jewish people, mass murder of Chinese, or mass enslavement of Greeks. The best conclusion is that God only very rarely interferes. I am not sure how God can stand by and watch bad things happen, but that is not the subject of this section.

We have to be careful about invoking divine intervention. Even a little too much divine intervention, far below what most people hope for, would completely invalidate free will and so take away much of what it means to be a human self. Either we get freedom or we get divine intervention, but we can't have both. God chose for us to have freedom. We have to make the best of that.

A more interesting question is why we have the feeling that God does intervene when the evidence is so strong to the contrary. There are many other similar delusory feelings, such as that justice prevails when it so often does not, or that democracy actually works. The feelings must have an evolutionary basis. It is clear that we can have feelings that don't match reality but that are still useful. As of not, it is not clear to me what the evolutionary basis must be for feeling that God intervenes. I am not sure how thinking this is so could help us unless it somehow spurred us to efforts that we would not otherwise make and that

were likely to lead to success we might not otherwise achieve. It is hard to see how belief in God's aid could lead us to those efforts and success when simply trying harder would not.

God Has a Detailed Plan.

The Big Bang and Evolution leave a lot to chance. It really could have turned out differently not only on Earth but all through the Cosmos. Even with natural laws as they are, and set as they are, life need not have evolved as it did in Earth. We need not have had the dinosaurs or warm-blooded birds. Even with the general outlines of life as they are, humans need not have evolved – that was as much accident as fate. Even if humans evolved, there need not have been Moses, the Buddha, Confucius, Chuang Tzu, Jesus, Mohammad, Socrates, Leonardo Da Vinci, Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, Albert Einstein, me personally, or you personally. It seems as if God has something more detailed in mind. He wanted all this to happen. He wanted all those people to come along, or people very similar to them. He might have wanted you personally and me personally to come along. He wants the world to do well. He wants humans to be good stewards of the planet and to succeed in self-government. He wants us to find a sustained decent gracious way of life. He wants us to avoid turning the Earth into a giant ghetto slum. God wants us to grow morally and in wisdom. He wants to see a few trees ten million years from now. God might not interfere directly to make sure all details of the plan come about but he did set it up and he will interfere to make sure it gets the best chance of coming about as it can.

I think God had a vision and a hope, and he did send prophets in some way, but I doubt the rest of this dream is true. God made a lot of worlds. God wants all of them to succeed in the sense given above. Still, I doubt God has a specific plan for each world, and I doubt he intervenes often enough, and deep enough, to make sure each world succeeds. I doubt God sent the particular person Mohammad although God might have used the person once he saw that Mohammad did come along. I do not know the limits that God sets himself on intervening to make sure any given world succeeds. If any given world fails, then apparently God can deal with that failure. God does not have a detailed plan for this world or for any other world.

God Has a Detailed Plan for You, Me, and All Events.

God wants you to be a good computer programmer. God wants you to run for city council. God wants you, an Afghani, to fight to get the Americans out of Afghanistan. God wants you, an Afghani, to fight to make Afghanistan a good country, and has sent the Americans to help you. God wants you to succeed as a car dealer, professor, waiter, pilot, plumber, movie star, or dental technician. God made sure you would find this particular church, house, or beautiful campsite. God wants me to write this book to help people. God wants you to be the particular great Darwinist who finally proves that God does not exist and thus rids the world of the evil of religion. God gave you that flat tire so you would not be killed in the 200 car pileup on the freeway; it is not clear what he had in mind for the 20 people who did die. God led you to pick the winning lotto ticket for 100 million dollars so you would put a new roof on the church. God let terrorists destroy the WTC so all good Americans would unite behind George W. Bush, a born-again Christian, and avoid the godless atheistic Democratic Party. God gave us all a destiny, and God helps us to find it again if we stray from it too far. Karma guides us to exactly what we need.

I doubt much of this is true. I imagine God can see what opportunities would be best for us, and what might tear us apart; and God hopes the best for us. But I doubt God guides us into exactly what would work best for us and into exactly how we might best help the world. If God did that, there would be no free will. It can be a comfort, and it can spur our efforts, to believe we have a God-given destiny, but it is not likely true.

God likely does intervene and guide some people a little bit. It is extremely unlikely that he does so for people in general to the extent that the Tanakh (Old Testament) said he did for the prophets and leaders of Israel, or that the New Testament said he did for Jesus. I do not know how much God allows himself to intervene, especially since God does not undermine free will. It is extremely unwise to rely on God's help in finding your destiny. "God helps those who help themselves".

Usually the idea that God micromanages our lives and events does little harm but, when combined with bad religion or bad politics, it can do a lot of harm. The suicide bombing of innocents comes immediately to mind but there are more insidious cases. In 2012, Richard Murdock, a Republican Congressman, declared that, when a woman is raped, God intended something good for any resulting baby, and so God intended the rape. Murdock wished to stop all abortion, and so he wished a rationale for all pregnancies. I am not sure of Murdock's full intent in the original statement because a flurry of "corrections" appeared afterwards; but I stand by this understanding of his statement. I am sure God hopes the best for every child born but I cannot believe God intends rape. We cannot use the ideas that God intends good for us, and God could interfere if he wants to, to excuse bad behavior or to manipulate other people. We have to see heinous behavior and bad events for what they are. We have to understand the many responses to bad actions and bad events, including that some women choose abortion when they are raped. That is part of the free will that people have in responding to the good and bad of the world.

Collective Punishment and Reward.

Collective punishment and reward was a common theme not only in the Tanakh (Old Testament) but in many documents of traditional religion. There are enough instances of the idea even pre-state people (when one person, a couple, or a family, break a "taboo", the whole people are punished until justice is done) that likely the idea arises easily among people in general. In the Tanakh, God collectively punished the Israelites to make them adhere to his rules. Mostly in the Tanakh, God's rules were moral, so God collectively punished the Israelites to make them more moral. That is where we get the idea of "ethical monotheism". Jesus expected God to collectively reward Israel in his time; Israel was to be the basis for the Kingdom of God. In ancient China, Heaven rewarded and punished the current ruler, and the people, through drought and war, when the ruler transgressed. In ancient India, the people suffered collectively, usually through war, when the ruler broke a moral rule or annoyed an important deity. In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, the gods sent floods, droughts, plagues, and conquerors. In all places, when the rulers acted well, and the people behaved properly, the rivers flowed abundantly but flowed within their banks, and the crops were heavy on the stalk.

I do not know if any of this collective reward and punishment really happened or if it is only stories. If it did really happen, it has stopped now. Christianity and Islam are not the new Israel, and so the idea of collective reward and punishment by God cannot happen to them. If there is a real "new Israel" it can only be the new Israel founded in 1948. No other nation, religion, or ethnic group is the new Israel, and

so collective punishment and reward to shape a nation for greatness cannot happen to any other nation, creed, or ethnic group now. It could only happen to Jews and-or Israel. If it does happen to Jews and-or Israel, I think the purpose would be as in the Tanakh, so Jews could better serve as the instruments of God to carry his message. I do not think God is using modern Israel that way, but I could be wrong.

Even if God guides some particular groups sometimes, I doubt very much God guides any group through collective punishment and reward. I doubt he used collective reward and punishment even in the classic times of the Israelites and Jews but rather guided them through sending prophets. I am certain he does not use collective reward and punishment now. In the Book of Ezekiel, the Tanakh explicitly and clearly repudiates collective reward and punishment.

We still think like in terms of collective reward and punishment to some extent. When gasoline prices go up through no fault of current leaders, we still replace the leaders, and suspect them of moral badness. When we have a year of drought or a have a major hurricane, we do the same. When things go bad nowadays, we say we have not broken a moral rule but instead have instituted a bad policy. Not only does the bad policy lead to bad results such as deficit spending and inflation, but God makes sure we get the message too through economic hardship and natural disaster.

Some groups still take an Old Testament attitude. Some groups in the United States, who wrongly call themselves Christians, picket the funerals of dead soldiers as a way to protest laws that do not punish homosexuality severely. They assume God killed the soldiers as collective punishment on America so that we would change the laws to be more in accord with what the religious groups want from the Old Testament. No environmental group will admit it in public, but I suspect some relish the current droughts, mudslides, fires, and high food prices caused by global climate change as divine retribution for a hundred years of bad economic and environmental policy.

It is possible that God guided the Israelites, and later the Jews, up to the time of Jesus. He might have guided the Jews afterwards, and might still be guiding them now. I do not know. I think it is more likely he guided the Israelites and Jews up the time of Jesus but stopped after that.

Other than that small guidance of the Israelites and the Jews, and other than sending prophets, I doubt very much that God guides any group in particular. God does not guide America, China, India, England, France, Germany, or even modern Israel, in particular or in general.

God does not collectively punish America through war and through the death of soldiers because America has tolerated homosexuality. Our innocent soldiers do not bear the burden of God's wrath. God did not collectively punish Pennsylvania for taking creationism out of its textbooks. God did not collectively reward the Reagan or Bush administrations despite their claims to godliness. God has not collectively rewarded the Clinton or Obama administrations even though they are just as godly as Reagan and Bush. God will not collectively reward or punish America if we elect Mitt Romney, a Mormon, as President.

In the modern world, the analog to collective punishment is natural laws, and, to a lesser extent, the force of social laws and culture. Whether we understand them or not, natural laws affect our lives, and we must pay attention. We have given up on the idea that God collectively punishes and rewards but we cannot give up on the idea that nature collectively punishes and rewards. When people abuse nature, we

all suffer together. When I wrote this section, it seemed the policy of the Republican Party that there is no global climate change that is caused by human action. I disagree. People have caused global climate change. Eventually, nature will settle the dispute more clearly than ever God seems to have done. On the day I revised this section, “super hurricane” Sandy was flooding the Northeast, in late October, well beyond normal hurricane season. We transfer much of the moral fervor that people used to feel toward God’s collective punishment and reward toward nature’s collective punishment and reward.

When a nation allows wholesale stupid mortgage agreements through lax laws, then the nation will suffer economically eventually, but not due to the intervention of God but due to economic laws. If the United States tries to take away guns, then there will be a lot of unrest, but not through the intervention of God. If America were to institute responsible and reliable health care, American would benefit, but not through the intervention of God. If America were to teach fair play and good citizenship in its schools, American would benefit, but not through the intervention of God. The Palestinians indiscriminately collectively hit Israel with rockets while the Israelis are indiscriminately collectively shell Palestine and round up Palestinians; both groups suffer much and benefit little; now neither group can stop; but not through the intervention of God.

Grace.

We resolve a dilemma gracefully when we find an action that allows us to give some attention to several appeals at once, in about the proportion that they deserve. We act gracefully when we interact so as to make people feel contented and so as not to ruffle feathers. We dance gracefully when we perform a move with minimum stress, minimum additional movements, and in a line that finds a balance between opposing tendencies. We are “in a state of grace” when we feel as if we know what we are doing, and that we can always find the right thing to do. Graceful action is like mathematical elegance. Even in mathematics, there is not necessarily any formula for this although the end result is a formula.

Now recall flight-and-fight. There is not necessarily any all-around perfect resolution to the problem for all species or even for all individuals within a species. Natural selection resolves the problem at any time, but the resolution can change over time. The optimum solution at any time is the graceful solution. The solution appears graceful when it works. As with other kinds of grace, there is no formula even if we can specify the outside limits within which the resolution occurs.

People seek grace in their actions, even everyday actions, just as they seek it in being a host, dancing, mathematics, flight-and-fight, personal life, political life, and relations with nature. People seek grace in their lives. When they find grace in their lives, they feel that it connects to other religious ideas. Religions such as Taoism and Buddhism make finding their version of overall grace a central element.

Just as God does not intervene much in human affairs, so God does not bestow a state of grace or lead some people to a state of grace. Nearly all feelings of being in a state of grace should be explained by reference to evolved psychology. When we prepare ourselves properly, and we are lucky, we find a state of grace. The fact that grace does not usually come from God does not mean it is wrong, false, or a delusion – although our belief that it does come from God can be wrong, false, and delusory. Rather, a state of grace can be a good thing, and it is not wrong to seek it.

Mana, Taboo, and the Force.

“Mana” and “taboo” are Polynesian words which I cannot translate accurately. “Mana” is something like “the Force” from “Star Wars”. “Taboo” does not mean simply “forbidden” but something like “dangerous because full of mana, so should be treated carefully by everybody, and so should be avoided by anyone who him-herself is not full of the right kind of mana”. Mana is like a loaded and cocked gun. I would not rush to meet a Jedi or Sith unless I had a lot of my own mana (Force). Among things that can be full of mana and so can be taboo are people, places, things, ceremonies, and works of art.

Things that have mana have power. The power need not be physical power, although often it is backed up by physical force. The power can be moral, but usually it has to be more than the usual power of morality to compel us through our conscience. For example, Jesus and Gandhi had the power of moral force, and religious leaders usually try to gain it. Mohammad had both strong moral force and physical force to back it up.

The best modern analog to mana might be “coolness”. A sad modern analog is “gangsta”, especially when we romanticize would-be tough guys. The TV character “Fonzy” had mana, especially when he could get people, animals, the weather, cars, jukeboxes, and other devices to do as he wished. Before about 1970s, mana was called “it” or “the ‘it’ factor”. Movie stars and magazine models were “it girls”. Now man can be called “the X factor”. All media stars want to have “it” but few really do.

It is not clear why mana is in some things but not in others. Muscle cars have mana but family sedans do not. The lack of mana caused the demise of the station wagon, and caused a switch to the SUV (equally without mana, but people are good at fooling themselves). Anthropologists have given explanations that correlate mana with aspects of social organization or with categories of culture, but the ties are never one-to-one, and I can’t go into it here. Mana is stronger in some things than in others but it is not clear why. It is not clear if the quality of mana varies according to the quality of the object, as for example the kind of mana for men and women differs.

Mana is usually beneficial, especially when used properly, as when millions of people honored the wish of a dying girl to provide clean water around the world. That was wonderful. Mana can be harmful when used improperly, as the Star Wars saga pounds into us with “the Dark Side”. Religious zealots use belief in mana to power terrorism. National leaders use belief in mana to start wars.

Mana very likely is related to the idea of success or of “making it” but I do not speculate here on how the two are related. Having mana means likely you will make it. Not having mana, or misusing mana, means likely you will fail.

Mana is related to magic but definitely is not the same as magic. Magicians might wish to tie into mana but they personally do not have it. In a famous story in the New Testament, a magician tried to buy the mana of the Christian apostles, but they would not sell it, and the magician died. Magic is usually aimed at the gain of your group or yourself without necessarily much regard for the greater group while mana usually has to take into account the greater group.

Mana is force. Force is usually neutral. Force can be used for good or evil, like a gun. It is not clear if mana can be evil. People who have mana can turn to evil, as the Sith do in “Star Wars”, but that does not make their mana a source of evil. The Force has a light side and a dark side but the dark side seems not able to endure long on its own.

Mana is often associated with creativity, especially procreation and social reproduction such as the yearly holidays, but mana can be tied to other kinds of creativity such as artistic creativity or making the rain fall. Because of its tie to creativity, it is easily abused in Romanticism. The creativity of mana often helps to sustain society. When mana is creative, it is like the idea of Brahman in Hinduism. When mana is supportive, it is like the idea of Vishnu or Krishna. Mana is also often apparent at transitions, as when the dry season turns to the wet season, when a child is born, or when a dead person becomes an important ancestor. Mana might be most dangerous in those times. When mana is a force, or the force, in transitions, usually it requires the end of a previous order. “The King is Dead, God Save the King”. Every new President requires the retirement of an old President. In those times, mana is like the idea of Shiva in Hinduism.

There is no real mana. There is no real Force. Mana is real only to the extent that we believe in it. Jesus did not achieve what he did because he great mana, and neither did Moses or the Buddha.

Giving Back and Forth.

I mentioned this idea in the chapter on evolution. Part of a relation between selves usually is giving-back-and-forth. The technical term is “reciprocity”. Although not always what Americans call a “gift”, for here, call what is given a “gift”. Gifts can be material objects or services, even services such as teaching or singing. What is received need not be the same as what is given; one person can give a pot while the other person can give a set of wooden spoons. The reciprocity can be between two people, one person and a group, two equal-sized groups, two groups of unequal size, or two subgroups of larger groups. The character of the relation is reflected in the giving. If the relation changes, giving alters to reflect that. A change in gifts can signal an intended change in the relation. When the color of the rose changes from yellow to red, the relation changes too. Besides reciprocity not being equal in kind (pots for spoons), it can also differ in value. Differences in value usually show differences in status. For the holidays, a tenant of an apartment house gives a week’s salary to the doorman while the doorman gives a small bouquet to the daughter of the tenant. Changes in the direction of inequality, or in the size of inequality, go along with changes in the relation. When an author sells a book to the movies, he stops getting free pizza from the local pizzeria and instead buys the owner’s kid a laptop for school. We not only give to other flesh-and-blood humans, we also give to animals, institutions such as charities, spirits, deities, real groups, and idealized groups. When selves can reciprocate but do not reciprocate, usually they don’t have much of a relation. If someone at the school lunch table could trade snacks but never does, he-she is not likely to have many friends. Reciprocity often is not so much about trading goods that we need right now, as trading fish for rice, but about showing that we are interested in keeping up a relation, as when we give them a bottle of wine and they give us a bottle of wine. When we want to end a relation, or change it drastically, we make a point of not giving, not giving back, giving only a tiny token, or giving something so big that it is impractical for the person to reciprocate. When the other person does the same, we get the message. Fiction about “manners” often hinges on reciprocity, such as in the work of Henry James.

Giving can be a way to start a relation; if we give, and then the other person gives back, something might be up. Even if we are already in a gift-giving relation, giving “spontaneously” and giving more can show that we want something special back. We want back what we cannot get for ourselves. A person might give his-her marijuana dealer a nice gift for the holidays so the dealer later finds high-quality marijuana instead of the usual stuff. We give our boss (Department Chair or Dean) a nice but modest gift so that our boss will invite us to the holiday party of executives or choose us to go on a trip. We call what we give so as to get something, or make sure of a relation, a “sacrifice”. A sacrifice can be to spirits or to flesh-and-blood people. Some people are adept at this art.

We have a relation, usually asymmetrical, with gods. We sacrifice to gods so as to keep up a relation and so as to get from them what we cannot get for ourselves, such as a cure for a disease. Sometimes we sacrifice a large thing such as a cow, but usually we sacrifice only a small token because we assume the god already as a lot more than we do and we don't want to give up too much in case the god is not inclined to grant our wish. When people want something from a god, they make promises to do things that they don't usually do, such as go to church or make a pilgrimage. The logic of this reciprocity can be quite interesting, but that topic belongs to anthropology.

Devotion or “Bhakti”.

People hold on strongly to relationships that have been rewarding in the past or that could be rewarding in the future, especially if the other person in the relationship is powerful, wealthy, talented, or otherwise promising. Less-powerful people do things often to keep up the relationship with more-powerful people in the hope of someday getting something important back. Powerful people put up with this giving because retainers can be useful, and because often what the powerful person gives is not very costly to him-her even if it is quite valuable to the retainer. A powerful person gets the taxes reduced for a retainer, and, in return, the retainer busts somebody's head for the powerful person. By devotion, people hope to belong to the same set as the object of devotion, or to become like the object of devotion. As with imitation, people hold on most strongly when they most feel the separation, as long as they feel they can narrow the separation, even when they know they can't bridge it entirely.

People do this with religious figures and deities as well. People become devoted, even when they don't understand the message, probably especially when they don't understand the message but can see the charisma of the religious figure. People express their devotion by doing things for the deity, whatever they can imagine the deity might like. Religious devotion is one of the two-or-three biggest causes of the spread of religious movements. Religious devotion is probably the biggest activity in keeping up a religion. It is at the heart of most religious activity by most people throughout the world. Most people are devoted to Jesus, the Buddha, Krishna, or Mohammad, rather than understand his message and follow that. Churches would be empty without devotion.

The Hindu term for religion through devotion is “bhakti”. Hindus accept it as a major way of religion, not only in Hinduism but in other religions as well. Hindus correctly see the devotion in other religions even when other religions do not see it. Hindus correctly see devotion to Jesus as bhakti even when Christians do not. I think the term can apply to devotion to an exalted human such as Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi even before he is made the manifestation of divinity, perhaps in expectation of divinity. In Hinduism, I do

not think the term can apply to devotion to a principle such as wisdom unless the principle is also expressed in a particular divinity such as Athena. A particular god is not often the embodiment of only one principle but can embody several principles. The same principle can “show up” in several gods. A god can be more than the embodiment of any principle, and usually is more. The proper activity of a devotee is worship. Christians follow bhakti when they worship Jesus; some Christians practice bhakti when they are devoted to Mary. Muslims follow the idea when they worship God (Allah) and are devoted to Mohammad, even when they say that Mohammad is only a man.

To a devotee, whether this world is big or small, rational or irrational, good or bad, fair or unfair, does not matter. As a mere human, I can't figure it out. In Muslim terms, this world comes from the will of God, and that is that. Fortunately, I don't have to figure it out. There are beings that are much more powerful and smarter than I am. If I show my commitment and devotion to them, and worship them in the manner they desire, they will put me right. Even if they don't fully understand, they understand much better than I do. They are much more likely to be right than I am. I am much more likely to get “in tune” with what is going on through devotion to them than in any other way.

Even if devotion does not get me “in tune” with the universe right away, still it has many other benefits. The higher being can help me get into heaven or can help me be reborn well. The higher being can bring me peace of mind and clarity of mind. It can help me to act better toward other creatures, or at least act in the right ways toward other creatures. The higher being can bring me wealth and success.

For a finite being such as a human being, complete understanding is not possible at all, and complete accord with the universe is not possible through rational means or even through morality that is grounded in rationality (“do unto others” and “applies equally”). The universe made us, so the universe will provide a way for us to get in touch with it and to merge back into it. Bhakti not only clarifies my mind, it also unifies me with the universe in the only way possible for a limited finite being. When I worship the god of my devotion, I am at one with the entire universe, not just at one with the god of my devotion. The god of my devotion is merely the instrument of unification with the whole universe. I cannot think of the universe as a whole but I can think of my god as a whole person. In worshipping my god, I am participating in the whole universe in the only way possible. This is how the world really works.

Because humans and even particular gods are limited finite beings, it is no contradiction to say that one person can be devoted to one god while another person is devoted to another god. The gods can even overlap or conflict. Devotion transcends all particular gods to bring all gods and all worshippers in line with the whole universe. This is one basis for the idea that “all gods are one” and “all paths lead to God”.

If we think of devotion as devotion, and leave out of consideration whether it leads us to unity with the universe, then we can see bhakti not only in devotion to gods but in devotion to business, politics, sports, science, causes, human people, power, art, nationality, and other human activities and goals. This kind of devotion also might lead us to unity with the universe in the only way possible for finite human beings but I do not speculate on that possibility now and I do not believe it. For a sense of this alternative, watch any movie devoted to a sport such as to skiing, skateboarding, football, martial arts, and basketball.

I find it hard to accept devotion to a deity as a primary form of religion. I doubt that devotion to a god or a saint allows a devotee to achieve unity with that god or achieve unity with the universe. Devotion to a god

feels good but that is the extent of its value. I have seen Christians who are devoted to Jesus, Hindus who are devoted to their particular god, devoted Buddhists, and Muslims who are devoted to Mohammad, the Koran, and Allah, do bad things and overlook good things that they should have done. Devotion to a god, saint, text, idea, or to Mohammad, does not necessarily lead you to do good things and it does not necessarily lead you to correct spiritual insight. Too often, devotion excuses bad behavior. It allows you to overlook important questions and correct principles. If you are not devoted to correct principles, then devotion to a god does not help. If you are devoted to correct principles, then you don't need devotion to a god. This is the central message of atheism, and, as far as it goes, it is correct here. If you worship a god without considering the correct principles for which the god stands, then you are too likely to do bad things. If you are devoted to the correct principles for which the god stands, then the god does not need, and likely does not want, your devotion to his-her person. The god prefers devotion to his-her correct principles, and correct action, more than devotion to his-her person. This is a message of the prophet Isaiah.

My position differs from atheism in these ways: I do not believe we can find correct principles without help from special people such as Jesus. Being devoted to the correct principles does not exclude the idea of God, and leads us to wonder about God. Accepting God (guiding mind) into the picture makes better sense of the correct principles.

The vast majority of religion is devotion. Most people cannot carry on religion except as some kind of devotion. Nearly all churches are organizations devoted to the ordering of devotion. Even intellectuals such as C.S. Lewis, who clearly understood correct principles, default to devotion as the main form of their worship, as in the book "Till We Have Faces" (see later chapter). When I say "trust God", I veer into devotion. Devotion for most people need not be bad as long as it does not lead them to do bad things, and does not prevent them from doing good things. Devotion would be good if it led people into doing good things, as when formal Christianity carried the message of Jesus. For more comments on mass religion and the role of devotion, see a later chapter.

Self-Validating Experiences.

See above. In the chapter on Issues, I opened this idea by mentioning self-validating prophecies and ideologies that eat the world. A self-validating experience is worthwhile in itself without borrowing the feeling of being worthwhile from anything else and without needing justification from anything else. A self-validating experience makes us believe in whatever is integrally involved in the experience. Almost always, a self-validating experience feels good, feels practically good, and feels morally good (or at least does not feel morally bad). A self-validating experience can feel good even when it involves physical pain, as when we get burned saving a kitten from a fire. When we sense that a self-validating experience involves something morally suspect, as in illicit sex, we usually find rationalisms such as moral relativism. Self-validating experiences can trump our sense of morality.

Self-validating experiences include: eating; intoxication; fun; sex; morality; kin; drugs; righteousness; self-righteousness; encountering the numinous; art; devotion; awakening; "reaching" Nirvana; "satori"; love; logic; religious justification; salvation; being sure you are going to heaven; comparative success; athletic triumph; racing; forbidden fruit; adolescent rebellion; being outside the law; following the rules; praxis; dialectic; kicks; creativity; glamour; feeling attractive; rites of passage; and initiation rituals. People need

a quota of self-validating experiences or they begin to feel empty. In a wise line, Paul McCartney said, “Fun is the one thing that money can’t buy”.

There is no good theory of self-validating experiences for me to offer here. Self-validating experiences likely have roots in our evolutionary history in acts that were useful for evolutionary success, and about which extended debate was counterproductive, such as sex. Self-validating experiences often borrow from context, especially from cultural context. In the West, it can be a self-validating experience both to break the law and to follow the law. Self-validating experiences are not merely culturally determined. We have learned to be somewhat skeptical of self-validating experiences, and to temper them with other calls, such as from reason. Still, we remain susceptible to them.

Religions and ideologies seek to ground themselves in self-validating experiences. If you can rest your ideology on a self-validating experience, then nobody can argue against you. Religions and ideologies seek to make sense of self-validating experiences in ways that justify the religion or ideology. We have all had the “Grand Canyon” experience (see the movie) in which we realize how big the world is, and how small and not very important we are (see also “Men in Black” and “Animal House”). We all also have felt that God (Dharma or Tao) considers us important, and wants the best for us. If a religion can put these two experiences together and make sense of them for us, or can make sense of them separately while keeping us from being bothered by the contradiction, then we tend to feel the religion is true, and to go along with its doctrines. Religions structure rituals as self-validating experiences so they can make participants go along with the doctrines of the religion.

People can get skeptical of the link between self-validating experiences and particular ideologies. When people get discouraged with a religion, they reject its interpretation of self-validating experiences. They seek other explanations of their self-validating experiences, or seek different self-validating experiences. When we reject formal Christianity, we find another explanation for the idea that God loves us. If we want somebody to reject a religion or an ideology, we try to sever the connection between the religion-ideology and the self-validating experiences that it explains. We show how Roman Catholicism or Lutheranism cannot be the correct account for the feeling of justification.

When people sever the link between self-validating experiences and their religion, they tend to get angry at the religion and to reject it entirely. They see the entire religion as hypocritical. When people feel a direct link to God without need of a hierarchical organized church, they reject the entire church and all its teachings. When people feel justified without need for a priest, they reject priests and churches. When atheists can find truth apart from the church, they reject all churches. Rejection can be as bad as simply going along with the religious definition of self-validating experiences and with religious dogma.

Both forging and severing links of self-validating experiences with institutions can be ways to manipulate other people and manipulate ourselves. We put people through strong initiation rites so as to control them. We allow ourselves to go through strong initiation rites so we will feel more a part of a group that we like. In both severing and connecting, we have to be careful of the groups and their doctrines. We have to choose wisely.

Self-validating experiences seem as if they should be the enemy of rationality and reason, and, often, the two camps do oppose. They don’t always have to be opposed. To necessarily oppose them is to make

the mistake of opposing reason and emotion. We can have the “Grand Canyon” experience and the “God loves me” experience together without giving up on all reason. We can balance our credit card statement while still realizing that we are only one small speck of dust in the universe. Most people manage to do this every day quite well.

In an important way that I don’t want to go into here, logic is a self-validating experience on which most science rests. How self-validating experiences and logic get along or don’t get along is a large topic. Rather than go into it directly here in this section of this chapter, I go into it indirectly at many points of the book. Please look for the topic in that way.

We can live by important principles, such as the Golden Rule, apart from self-validating experiences. We can live by principles without grounding them in self-validating experiences and without devaluing self-validating experiences. We can have self-validating experiences related to principles, such as when we help somebody who is “down and out”. We can have self-validating without giving up on principles. We try to find the accord between self-validating experiences and our principles. If we find perfect accord, we are quite lucky. If discrepancies lead us to examine both principles and experiences, then we are also quite lucky. If discrepancies lead us to feel bad and to wander aimlessly, usually it is time to get help. Discrepancies should never be an excuse for bad behavior.

Self-validating experiences are like “self-fulfilling prophecies”. You can understand one without the other, although they often reinforce each other. I take up self-fulfilling prophecies elsewhere.

Secrets.

People love secrets. Secrets are often self-validating experiences. Maybe because we all have secrets, we are sure everybody else has them too, that their secrets are really important, and that we would have more power if we knew their secrets. We want to know their secrets. We are sure that successful people have secrets, and, if we knew their secrets, we would be as successful as they are. If we are successful, we think it is because of some little technique we learned along the way, and want to keep that secret. You can lure a person into a relation if you tell them a secret, and you can keep a person in a relation by promising to reveal a secret in the future. A secret promised is a gift. You can keep the relation indefinite by keeping the revelation date indefinite. When explained in this simple way, it sounds silly. But people really do behave this way.

Religions keep people by offering them secrets, often in layers, often in increasing obscurity. TV get-rich-quick gurus and self-help gurus make a good living this way. Sometimes they actually give good tips but usually the tips are something everybody has already heard. This also sounds silly but is real.

Empty Secrets.

Self-validating experiences need not have content in the same way that “apples are red” has content. There is not necessarily any content in wonder at the universe. We just wonder. “What if the secret is that there is no secret?” That is an old joke. It still often happens. An ideology, religion, or institution, can borrow on the force of self-validating experience to pretend that it has a self-validating experience at its heart but that it cannot reveal the experience or explain the experience in mere words. It has an empty

secret, but the emptiness still has power. People really want to believe in secrets, so it is easy to make them believe, and to get them to do what you want, even when there is no content to the secret. If there is any content to the secret, the content is that the perpetrator is smart, the believers are fools, and the perpetrator is taking advantage of them. It is a mental pyramid (Ponzi) scheme based on a made-up secret self-validating experience.

Unless a religion has a point in addition to secrets and to self-validating secrets, be careful of the religion. The religion should have a clear goal that it is willing to tell you about. Good goals for a religion include being a better person, morality, and working hard to make a better world.

For a lot of cults, the point of the cult seems to be to get other people to join the cult, who then get more people to join the cult, and so on. Unless there is a reason to join the cult other than to get other people to join the cult, don't join.

There are exceptions, but be wary. In martial arts, sometimes it is necessary to make people repeat movements thousands of times before they fully know what the movement is all about. If you give them ideas before they act, the mental buzzing interferes with the action. Yet, in the end, they do know. The action is not an empty secret.

Meaning can be like a secret. Searching for meaning is like searching for a secret. Sometimes there is no secret meaning, and we have to have the search knocked out of us by clever use of an empty secret. Taoism, Buddhism, and Zen sometimes use this technique, but, as with martial arts, it is not the basis for a mental pyramid scheme. It is a non-ideological way to stop mental pyramid schemes.

Many people get interested in art because some art has a deliberate meaning. Then they wrongly think all art has to have a meaning. Many young people get interested in art because they see in art comments on society, life, and their lives in particular. This is not an illusion. That commentary really is in some art. It is not in all art. Most art does not have a deliberate meaning or serve as a commentary. I like nearly all music, including jazz and classical music. Only some jazz is "commentary" art. Most jazz is not about anything in particular yet it is still good art. Most rock is commentary music. Young people have trouble going from rock and roll to jazz and classical music because jazz and classical music is not predominantly commentary on young life like rock.

Sometimes the only way to get a person to stop being afraid is to scare the crap out of him-her until he-she realizes he-she is still alive, and then can stop being scared. Sometimes the military and martial arts use this technique. Sometimes the only way to get a person to stop picking apart and bolstering things is to undermine everything, including especially the self, until the person just blows up and starts to live in the ordinary real common sense world. Be careful of the fear technique because usually life gives us enough to be afraid about without adding more to be afraid about. If we live long enough, we get over some of the fear. Sometimes it is better to help another person to live long enough to get over the fear rather than to try to scare them out of the fear.

Pyramid Schemes.

A mental pyramid scheme is one kind of world-eating ideology. It is easiest to explain the subject of this section if I describe how I came to see it. In the 1960s and 1970s, Americans faced not only evangelizing Christians but also evangelizing Buddhists, Hindus, and Taoists. I recall being harassed by a Buddhist from a sect. He said, if I joined, I would feel good, and I would see the world as it really is. I would go out and get other people to join. Then what? Then we all would go out and get even more people to join. Why? Because people in the movement are happy and have good lives and they go to Buddhist heaven while people outside are not and do not. What makes you have a happy good life? Seeing what the world is all about and getting other people to join. Expansion makes you happy. Turning other people into you makes you happy. The secret consists of perpetuating the secret. This is another version of Agent Smith. It is a mental pyramid scheme like the pyramid schemes used to sell soap or real estate.

This does not work. There has to be a point to the movement other than simply expanding and making other people like you. There has to be an external point like saving the whales or ending government interference in the free market. If all we have is a magical self-validating experience that automatically makes people inside feel good and makes them want to go get other people into the movement, then really the movement is empty no matter how beautiful the experience.

Movements that feed on themselves do not need content. The less content the better. If that Buddhist sect had promised I would levitate, and then I could not, I would have quit. By promising me nothing except a vague “wow” experience and the call to call others, the movement had nothing deniable, and could go on forever. This is a pyramid scheme. Once in, successful movements can keep people in.

In fairness to Buddhism, most Buddhism is not like that, and most Buddhism has a clear solid agenda. Unfortunately, too much Christianity is like that. Believers have a “wow” experience in the presence of the Lord, in the presence of other believers, or at a ceremony in church. Sometimes being in a group leads you to a self-validating wow experience. The believers tag a doctrine to the feeling. You think you are forgiven and saved just because Jesus died. You think Jesus was resurrected, his resurrection has cosmic importance, and so you will be resurrected and live forever in heaven too. The doctrine says the self-validating “wow” is not fully self-validating unless you go out to get other people to do the same. You get converts so you can continue your “wow” experience and share it. “Come with us and be saved.” What happens after I am saved? “You go out and save more people, who go to save more people, and so on.” The church grows on itself, like the housing bubble of the 2000s or like a chain email. Most bubbles burst but some go on for a long time, such as some forms of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Taoism.

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

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

Explaining Everything.

This section continues the topic begun in the chapter on issues about ideologies that eat the world.

If religion did not explain important things that are hard to explain, there would be few reasons for religion. Religion has to explain, to some degree, badness, unfairness, random events, why some people make good use of a good start in life while other people “blow it”, why some people can overcome a bad start in life, why the universe is instead of is not, why they universe is as it is instead of otherwise, etc. Yet ideologies that explain too much are strange and creepy, especially ideologies that explain everything. They are like conspiracy theories. We should be careful of religions that explain everything too easily just as we are wary of conspiracy theories. Religions that explain everything tend to feature self-validating experiences, empty secrets, and mental pyramid schemes. There is no good theory of ideologies that explain everything that I know of, so I do not offer one here.

We should reject religions that explain everything but we should not reject religions that explain a lot, and we should not accept a religion just because it explains very little. There is no point stepping around the pond only to fall into a well. I don’t know how much is too much, too little, or just enough. The religion that I have offered in this book does not explain everything. For example, I have no good explanation for prophets or for all of badness.

An ideology that explains everything needs a kernel of truth, a way to extend the kernel of truth plausibly, a way to get around counter-examples and cases where it fails, and ways to debunk rivals. Sometimes a few examples can do almost as well as a theory. For the first example, pick your own favorite conspiracy theory such as that aliens walk among us and slowly influence the course of Earth history. “God’s will” explains everything to people who truly believe. “Market worship” believes the free market can fulfill all human needs as well as they can be fulfilled. Neo-classical economics and modern evolutionary theory explain all human behavior on the basis of strategic self-interest. “Jesus saves” explains all good feelings about religion and all seeking for God. “The Devil Did It” explains everything we don’t like. “The dialectic” (from Hegel, Marx, and Sartre) explains all logical and historical events, and the ultimate rise of classless society. “Those scum bags did it” explains all social problems. Yin-and-yang coupled with “changes” (I Ching) is the Chinese equivalent of the Western dialectic. Dharma, karma, and reincarnation explain all current social relations and your duty, and are the equivalent of Western dialectic. “Depth psychology” (Freud, Jung, etc.) explains all human action as variations of food, sex, death, and power so that painting the Mona Lisa and killing a lot of innocent school children come down to the same thing.

Perhaps the biggest problem with ideologies that explain everything is that they can be used to rationalize everything as well, including bad personal behavior and social injustice. They are a type of contradiction from which we can deduce any nonsense (see Chapter 15 on Mistakes). If dialectic, market worship, karma, yin-yang, God’s will, or “Jesus saves”, can explain why an otherwise talented person should be born with epilepsy and so never realize his-her other talent, then those ideologies can rationalize anything

we do to people. It is God's will that poor people never get an education. It is the logic of the market that the rich be allowed to control politics. It is karma that poor people serve the rich. It is in the nature of yin and yang that women serve men or that men go to war. We need to be able to find good explanations without being able to explain everything so that we can analyze correctly.

Science aims to explain everything. So far, it has not succeeded, but I expect it to go a long way, and, someday, it might succeed. In theory, science is not an empty theory of everything because what it says can be tested, and, if false, rejected. This idea of science is too simplistic. A few important ideas in science cannot be conclusively tested but we accept them anyway, such as evolution. Still, science is not the same as simplistic ideologies that explain everything, there is no reason to reject science, and there are abundant good reasons to accept it.

Tit-for-Tat, Atonement, "What Goes 'Round Comes 'Round", Judgment, Karma, etc.

Reciprocity is part of relations between selves. Most of our relations are with people similar to ourselves, and so we get to expect that reciprocity will be roughly equal or roughly tit-for-tat. Most of the relations in the world after the rise of agriculture were, in fact, approximately equal or tit-for-tat, such as going to the market. We come to think that, if we do something, something of about equal magnitude will happen back to us. If we say something nice, somebody will say something about equally nice back to us. If we give a gift, we will get about that much back. If we do a favor, somebody will do a favor of about equal magnitude back for us.

In the same way, we come to think that, if we do something bad, something bad will happen back to us of about the same magnitude. We expect an appropriate punishment for our crimes. People think this way not just because people usually are in relations and we punish deviations from the relation appropriately, but because people live in groups and groups punish criminals appropriately. Often the two punishments are the same thing. When we get caught stealing from a friend, the friend hits us, and then the group won't have anything to do with us either.

We have a relation with non-physical spirits. Just as real people reward us when we do something good, and punish us when we do something bad, we expect the spirits to do the same. Spirits reward and punish through the medium of nature. If we do something good, maybe we catch a big deer especially easily, or we find a large apple tree with the apples near ripe. If we do something bad, we slip, fall, and cut our leg, or we spend a day hunting and gathering with nothing to show for our effort.

Because we expect punishment to follow crime, if we punish ourselves before somebody else does it, we can make sure the punishment fits the crime, make sure nothing terrible happens, show other people that we have the right mind and can be trusted, and hopefully can re-enter relations with everybody in good standing again. People atone for their crimes.

Because we expect a punishment to follow a crime a large share of the time, when we see a punishment, we infer a crime. If Joan slaps Jim, we expect Jim did something wrong. Because we have a relation to non-physical spirits, if a rock falls on Jim's head, we suspect Jim did something bad even though we didn't seem him do something bad. We hope Jim confesses and atones so nothing worse happens, and so we don't accidentally get caught in the crossfire.

We do know of unusual punishments, as when somebody steals from his friend, and then the friend kills the person and his-her entire family. But we don't expect disproportion. We expect roughly tit-for-tat for bad behavior and punishments. If a truly awful thing happens, we suspect a truly awful crime behind it.

In the major religions, these attitudes have led to the expectation that God keeps a ledger book of our good deeds and bad deeds. We get sent to heaven or hell according to the sum of the ledger book. The equivalent to a ledger in non-theistic religions (Buddhism and Hinduism) is Karma. I take up differences between ledger and Karma in later chapters; they are not great. We get rewarded and punished in about correct proportion to our deeds.

Grace Again, for Our People.

It doesn't matter if this world is good, bad, fallen, hell, or heaven. What matters is the situation of me and people like me. If we can feel a better world, and respond to that better, and if the better world can reach back to us, then that is all that matters. All that matters is our connection to better-ness. We can achieve a state of grace in this world through what we feel, know, see, or otherwise sense. If there is a next life, a heaven or hell, then achieving grace in this world prepares us for heaven in the next. People like us naturally tend to form a community of people who have insight and grace. It is too bad that not all people can have the same sensitivity as we do but we can't do anything about them. All we take care of is ourselves and people like us. Within our community, we can achieve something like a heaven on this world, with success for our people.

Grace does not have to be the standard Christian idea of grace with goody-goody people floating around with haloes over their heads. Grace can be any insight that gives some satisfaction, carries us above the mundane world, and sets us apart from other people without insight. All major religions have some idea of grace in this sense: born again, saved, in touch with God, Enlightened, in touch with the Tao, chosen of God, stewards of Heaven, etc. Even modern religions such as Scientology have a sense of special people who are in touch with other special people in a mutually-supporting community. All major religions have a rationale for why the world is as it is, why there are some special people, and why there are some not-special people. Scientology sees special people as continuations of successful people from another world and time.

It is easy to make fun of this view when it leads to self-proclaimed superiority and privilege, as it often does. When it leads to badness, it should be condemned. It is a lot harder to get rid of this view and its bad results. If you are reading this book, chances are you are a bit more sensitive to religious and spiritual issues than most people, have abilities that other people don't have as much, and would like to be in touch with other people like you. That is natural. It also leads easily to abuse.

The real questions are: Which states of grace are really states of grace and which are counterfeit or only pale imitations? What should people in a real state of grace do? There are no ready answers. I think it is a good idea to act as if grace was irrelevant, and simply try to be useful, decent, and to make the world a more interesting place.

Rituals.

This section does not offer a theory of rituals. Rituals often are a type of self-validating experience. They can be an empty self-validating experience, but, here, I take them as something usually better. Rituals do not have to be anything formal like a high mass. Rituals can be any activity with fairly stereotyped actions, people do the activity at regular times or on particular occasions, and the participants have fairly well-defined relations to each other. Usually the participants are in the same in-group, such as a family, school, church, ethnic group, religious group, or nation state. Rituals include pep rallies, Saturday pizza-and-movie night, holidays, going to church, going to work, going to lunch with friends at work, checking email again after lunch, burying the dead family pet, birthdays, weekend sex, etc. Rituals used to include family dinner. Rituals can be held on special irregular occasions, such as a funeral or after a disaster, as long as they are similar enough from time to time and-or they borrow motifs from other regular similar rituals.

People do rituals for many reasons, often all at the same time. Again, the reasons almost certainly have a basis in our evolutionary history but the evolutionary theory of rituals is not yet well-enough developed to go into here. It is easy to give plausible reasons for a ritual but, if we go deep enough, it is also easy to see that the reasons themselves need explanation. For example, rituals very often comfort people, even rituals such as the Fourth of July. Why do people need comfort then, how does comfort “work” in various situations, and how is it that ritual can comfort people in just the way they need then? Keep in mind the many reasons for rituals for use in later chapters on stances and religions.

-Rituals give comfort.

-Rituals allow us to repeatedly see who is in our group so we know who is with us when.

-Rituals allow us to see several of our in-groups in appropriate situations, and to evaluate each group in its appropriate setting.

-Rituals allow us to evaluate the condition of the people in our group and the condition of our group.

-Rituals reinforce bonds of the group.

-Rituals connect us to an ideology, usually an ideology that is important for our group.

-Rituals reinforce religion, and reinforce our systems of categories.

-Rituals allow us to evaluate other groups.

-Rituals allow us to evaluate the particular individuals of other groups.

-Rituals allow us to show the condition of our group, and its members, to other groups, particularly after a change in our group such as a death. We put our best face forward.

-Ritual helps us through changes but giving us a solid base from which to change, and by allowing us to introduce changes in small manageable pieces.

It is tempting to think the ability for ritual evolved so as to fill these uses, and that we completely explain ritual as “nothing but” when we list these uses. That is not so. Ritual is a part of our evolved abilities. It is in its own right before it does anything in particular. These uses surely played a part in the evolution of the ability for ritual, and surely play a part in the actual acting of ritual, but they do not necessarily explain how ritual evolved, or what ritual is all about and is only about. That is why this section does not offer a theory of ritual.

Friend Signals; and Taboo among Friends.

Keep in mind that “taboo” does not mean “forbidden” but “handle carefully because special”. Not all our friends, relatives, associates, etc. are the same way to us. Not even all our friends among our friends, relatives among our relatives, and etc. are the same way toward us. We use rituals, signs, and other markers to show our various relations. We do some things with some people, not do some things with them, and do, and not do, other things with other particular people. Boyfriends and girlfriends have “their” particular places, songs, dates, etc. Families have theirs. A common theme in movies since the 1980s has been a friend who sulks because his-her good buddy has now gotten a girlfriend-boyfriend and now does not do all those special friend things they used to do before. The change in activities signals a change in relations. Movies hopefully teach us how to go through the changes so that we keep the best of both worlds.

Sometimes we signal relations with an especially close friend by what we don't do. We don't do anything to undermine their identity. Good friends do not “out” their gay friends. We do not reveal friends' most embarrassing moments. We do not show all the pictures from childhood. We do not reveal weaknesses of our friends or any group we are in. We build layers of defense. All this defense is taboo. During the first craze for “Cabbage Patch Dolls”, my wife and I lived in an apartment complex in which also lived many families with children. My wife and I became friends with some sisters who were about eight years old. One day my wife tried to serve them some Chinese cabbage. When the girls found out what it was, they wouldn't eat it. They did not eat cabbage. To do so would be like eating their dolls, their friends, would be cannibalism, and would undermine their friendship with their particular dolls and all Cabbage Patch dolls. This might seem silly but it is a common way of thinking and acting. We protect our religions and groups in the same way. We do not wear the colors of other schools, and we do nothing to debase the flag or colors of our own school.

The movie “Sucker Punch”.

Do not read this section if you wish not to spoil the movie. We all need help sometimes. We all have been helped. People usually enjoy helping other people and nature. Some people are willing to sacrifice much for others, such as people who give bone marrow to a stranger. We learn some lessons only from the sacrifice of others, as when a friend falls into drugs and we learn not to do that, or when a friend helps us survive a break-up and we learn what to do from him-her. Most people can lead a normal life only through the sacrifice of other people who cannot lead a normal as a result of the sacrifice, the theme of Moses standing at the door of the Promised Land, and the theme in several great movies by John Ford, including “The Searchers” and “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance”. Soldiers are willing to take this

chance, but we hope they can return to normal life when they get home. It is a theme of the movie "Saving Private Ryan".

In the movie "Sucker Punch", the innocent heroine is about 16 years old (the actress playing her is older but not so much older that it spoils the illusion). The evil stepfather of the innocent heroine wrongly puts her in a home for wayward girls so he can hurt her and take her inheritance. The head orderly in the home is powerful and evil. The stepfather arranges with the head orderly to have a visiting doctor cut the brain of (lobotomize) the girl so she will become a "vegetable". The evil head orderly also sometimes does this to girls so he can use them for sex. The girl has only a few days to escape. With the help of some other girls, she carries out a plan that would lead to their escape if it worked. The girls in the home already have a natural leader, who is not the "new girl". The natural leader at first opposes the plan but then goes along with it when she sees the other girls intend to carry it out anyway and they need her help. For the plan to work, somebody has to distract the bad guys long enough so that the girls can steal items that they need. The plan needs several items and several episodes of distraction. To do this, the new girl dances. In each dance, she creates amazing new fantasy worlds into which the audience goes for a while. In each world, imaginary members of the gang of girls are on a mission and have to fight bad guys. Each world has its own spirit. In the real world of the home, when the real escape is underway but not yet achieved, the weakest girl in the gang is caught and made to confess the plan. The plan is almost but not entirely thwarted. Only the new girl and the natural leader can get free. Yet now that the bad guys are alerted, only one can escape. All along, we thought the plan for freedom has been "for" the new girl and "all about" the new girl, but now the new girl understands better. The new girl knows now that the events started by her coming to the home were really for the natural leader of the girls and were really all about her. The events were not about the new girl. The natural leader of the girls is to be saved, but only through the self-sacrifice of the new girl. The nature leader is that best person among us who we want to succeed. The new girl allows herself to be captured as a distraction so the natural leader can escape. As a result, the new girl is lobotomized and loses herself entirely, but she goes with a smile at what she has accomplished. I don't know how much the movie was inspired by the true story of Frances Farmer. See the Internet.

Watching "Sucker Punch", or any movie, is like watching the magical dances of the new girl in the movie. "Sucker Punch" comments on us as we watch it. We are like the people in the movie that watch the magic dances of the new girl. We are as much "taken in" for a while as they are. We are as much freed as they are. The director makes sure we know this. (Using "watching" as a theme in the movie that we now watch can lead to a paradox. I don't consider that possibility here.)

To lose yourself through brain damage, and then become the toy of a bad person, is perhaps the worst thing that can happen to a sentient being (a person), worse than death, and worse than being trapped in the "matrix" because you cannot escape from brain damage but you might escape from the matrix. To be maltreated so that you cannot recover is as much to suffer brain damage as to have a needle jammed in your brain. Both are evil. Voluntarily to lose yourself in this horrible way, for the sake of others, is one of the bravest greatest acts that any person can do.

Ordinarily I dislike allegorical interpretations, but here are some: The home for wayward girls is like the daily common world of delusion, the liquid world, the world of samsara and maya, the fallen world, one world among many in the total system of many lives and many worlds, or the total system of many lives

and many worlds; that is, our world. It is like the Romantic world created when the Spirit loses itself. Our world need not be bad but it is bad when bad people take control. The sub-worlds that the new girl creates during her dances are like particular adventures that the Spirit creates, especially to advance its cause, as, for example, the Renaissance. The new girl is like the Romantic Spirit sacrificing itself so the world can be born, carry on, and can eventually come to a proper achievement. The Spirit loses itself so we limited others can find ourselves. The new girl is like a bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism, who voluntarily puts aside his-her spiritual enlightenment-and-release, and who continues to live in the world of delusion, to make sure all other beings achieve their enlightenment. The bodhisattva loses him-herself so other can find their selves first. The bodhisattva creates sub-worlds as expedient means to help other people find what they need. The new girl is like a Hindu avatar who takes on a particular form to save people in particular circumstances, like Vishnu becoming Krishna the charioteer of Arjuna. The new girl is like some Hindu goddesses who dance particular sub-worlds worlds into existence; the danced worlds are real within themselves but are subordinate to the greater world of many lives and many worlds. The items that the girls seek in their fight for freedom are like the magical weapons given to a Hindu hero by the great gods Brahma and Shiva. The new girl is like Jesus sacrificing himself so we can be free and we can go on to have decent lives. The new girl is like a Muslim martyr who dies in battle for the glory of God. The new girl “saves Private Ryan” by willingly giving the most that can be given.

Allegory is like dogma. All dogma tends to turn bad. Allegory is more prone to turning bad than most dogma. For this movie, and for self-sacrifice in general, allegory fools us into a bad attitude. If you can avoid allegory, simply see the movie, and have your own ideas, then do that.

The idea of self-sacrifice is too often abused. It is glamorized to enable bad motives. Allegorical visions of self-sacrifice promote the abuse and they promote self-deception. People “get off” on the idea of self-sacrifice; to “get off” on the idea is bad; it undermines the good done by real self-sacrifice. We don’t look at self-sacrifice directly for what it is but instead look at it only allegorically. Instead of seeing self-sacrifice as a horrible crime forced on the new girl by evil people, we see it as an uplifting act that makes the new girl noble. We want to be like that, not really to help other people, but because it is so cool, glamorous, and seemingly spiritually successful. To self-sacrifice justifies us, saves us, and allows us to overlook our faults, frustrations, and failures. People glamorize self-sacrifice and martyrdom so they can endure their own silliness. People did this with the Frances Farmer. It is part of Muslim extremism, PC attitude, and the Right Wing stance. It is part of the political-and-religious personality of our times. That is why we-the-movie-viewers are like the people in the film that watch the magical dances of the new girl. Delusions about self-sacrifice are a kind of made-up distracting world as in the magical dances. This delusion about self-sacrifice is as sad as the forced self-sacrifice by the new girl. This delusion is a self-lobotomy that does not save anybody. It is better to see through the silliness and to save what you can of yourself and other selves. Saving yourself is the best way to save the new girl and to thank the new girl. That is what the natural leader of the girls did, and that is why, really, it was all about her all the time, not about the new girl.

I point out several times in the book that people in state societies need a quasi-divine human mediator between the world of humans and the world of the gods. All the major religions focus on such figures. Even Judaism and Islam need these people, although, officially in those religions, they remain merely human. A common attribute of these mediators is extreme self-sacrifice, usually death. The misleading

allegorical glamorization of sacrifice feeds off of, and feeds into, this need for a quasi-divine hero. I do not fully understand this need and how it works; but I know it when I see it.

Working for the welfare of others is right. Sometimes sacrifice is unavoidable, and I thank the people who have done that so I can have a clear mind, secure body, and political freedom. I don't know how the new girl could have avoided self-sacrifice. Maybe in that situation she did have to sacrifice herself, and maybe that was the best thing to do. But it is not an overall good thing to do, and self-sacrifice should not give us pangs of satisfaction, justification, and salvation. Getting forced into self-sacrifice is not a good thing. It is just a tragedy. To glamorize the self-sacrifice of the new girl is to betray the self-sacrifice of true heroes, to betray her particular self-sacrifice, and to give in to deluded and perverse ideology. The best way to honor the people who have to sacrifice is to live well in the world that they could not get but wanted you to have anyway; that is what Private Ryan did.

Biologists have shown clearly how sacrifice can have roots in evolutionary success. Likely there is an evolved basis for the tendency to glamorize self-sacrifice too. People who sacrifice, even if they don't die, and the kin of such people, are highly regarded. People who sacrifice a little, and survive, can use it as a tool to make other people do what they want for a long time after. Alluding to past sacrifice is a good way to get enabled. A common joke on this theme is: "I carried you in my belly for nine months, and I fed you at my breast for a year, so now you have to make it up to me". The kin get a bonus from the self-sacrifice of their kinsperson, even if the kinsperson doesn't die. The kin retell the sacrifice and remind the people of the group how much they owe. I don't go into the question of evolutionary roots here.

16 Common Mistakes

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

Balance and Judgment.

We can avoid many mistakes by seeking a balance between tendencies, sometimes between two opposing tendencies, and sometimes between more than two. We can be too strict with our children or too lax. In the law, we seek the common ground between justice, mercy, and strictness. So seek the balanced middle first to see if that makes best sense.

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

PART 1: Going Overboard

Sects.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not "Nothing But"; Speculating on Hidden Motives.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Evolved Basis and “Nothing But”.

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

Society Made Me Do It.

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

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

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

Widespread Focus or Narrow Focus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

God is on Our Side.

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

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

Ideology is not Enough; Decency is Enough.

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

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

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

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

Collectivism and Individualism.

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

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

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

Cosmic Significance.

“I got dem Ol’ Cosmic Blues again”.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Religious Leaders as Cosmic Principles.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mystic Conspiracy of Events; Those Patterns in the World.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Family and Friends.

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

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

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

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

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

Better Than Family Values.

You have to be more than just a good family person. You can be good in religion without being a family person at all. Religion is bigger than families. To make family the center of religion is to commit idolatry. Just as Jesus requires us to be more than good citizens, so also Jesus requires more than family values. There is nothing wrong with family values nearly all of the time, and there is much right with them nearly all the time. But family values are not the same as the teachings of Jesus, and they cannot substitute for his teachings. To substitute family values for the teachings of Jesus is the same as to substitute romantic self-indulgence for the teachings of Jesus. You come short of the mark. You sin.

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

God’s principal role is not protector of family values, any kind of family values. God is not primarily the god of the hearth. God dislikes immorality, including some kinds of sexual immorality and some kinds of family immorality. We should not have sex with our children. Still, God did not have only one kind of family in mind, and God does not take a highly active role in protecting that kind of family.

Collecting Experiences.

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

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

Life is an Adventure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

PART 2: Standard Errors of Official Religion.

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

“The Bible” includes the Tanakh (Old Testament) and the Christian New Testament. The Bible is not science. The Bible is not an objective explanation of history, biology, physics, political science, or even theology. It is a collection of stories, some of which are based on real historic events, and some of which teach about morality, life, military strategy, politics, and God. Some messages are good and some bad. The Bible contains few predictions about specific events in the future. The Bible is not consistent, and it can be contradictory. It is not self-evident. It requires some interpretation to understand. People select what they will take seriously and what they will ignore. People interpret what they take seriously to suit their own needs. Interpretations differ and cannot be reconciled. It makes sense to say that God spoke through the Bible, but that does not mean we have to accept every line as literally true or as binding. The Bible has a lot of bad stuff in it, such as genocide, which we cannot take as binding. The Bible does not speak to many modern issues such as cloning. Many issues we have to decide apart from the Bible such as whether to have national health care. Even when the Bible is clear on some issues such as helping the poor, many Christians apparently decide not to follow it. For issues that we cannot decide ourselves and on which the Bible does speak, we can fall back on the Bible as a reference. Even in those cases, do not forget the potential for dispute. For example, if we cannot decide for ourselves about divorce, we can fall back on the fact that the Old Testament allowed men to have more than one wife and allowed men to divorce women but not women to divorce men, or fall back on the fact that Jesus seems to allow only monogamy and seems to forbid divorce, or that Paul and Matthew seem to allow both divorce and remarriage in some cases.

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

Divine Gifting.

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

People that believe in spirits think we can get into a relation with a spirit by giving the spirit a gift. Both ideas are wrong. There are no small spirits, so we cannot get into a relation with them by giving. Even though there is a God, we cannot cajole God with gifts. I could never understand why God might want a burned dead animal or even a wreath of flowers. We cannot even give God something like a gift (not drinking beer for Lent), a task (working for the homeless for a month), or a pilgrimage (going to Notre

Dame Cathedral or the birthplace of Luther). If we want something, we can just ask for it, but we should not be too hopeful. Most of what we want is silly.

The only real gifts we can give to God are a good heart and good actions. The only benefits to us in our relation to God are that the gift we give to God shows to us our intent; it might help us to know our selves. The gift is more about us than about God or our relation with God. We can think of it as a gift to God as long as we do not get confused about who really benefits and why.

No Negotiating.

Giving a gift to God in hope of getting something good back is negotiating with God. We cannot negotiate with God. As Jim Morrison whined in the 1960s, "You cannot petition the Lord with prayer". We cannot ask things like, "If you save me from this sinking ship, I will say a special prayer everyday for all the rest of my life". Barney Stimpson on the TV show "How I Met Your Mother" cannot promise God to go to church regularly if a woman he had sex with does not get pregnant. We cannot even make really good-hearted laudable bargains such as, "If you save my daughter from cancer, you can kill me right now, or you can give me her cancer instead". In some cases, such as with sick kin, it is impossible not to try negotiating like this, and I doubt that it hurts much to try. But we should not expect to have our prayers answered, and we should not get angry when they are not answered. I do not know what not being able to negotiate implies about relations with God or about the place of prayer.

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

Abraham did negotiate with God in the Bible, but that does not mean it really happened, that we could do it, or that it applies in all cases. Abraham did not negotiate to get something for himself or for a loved one. Abraham did not give God a gift to butter God up. Abraham negotiated on behalf of humanity, decency, and mercy. We could do the same. I am not sure if negotiating on behalf of the greater good would help but I see little harm in trying if we feel up to it. Abraham's example shows that we can have a relation with God and what a relation might be like. Humor and irony play big parts.

No Bookkeeping.

God does not assign points to good deeds and bad deeds. There are no points. There are no karma points, spiritual points, good deed points, bad deed points, or wish points. We cannot add good points or add bad points. We cannot subtract bad points from good points. We cannot use good points to make up for bad points. We cannot use good deeds to make up for bad deeds. Bad deeds do not erase good deeds. We do not go to heaven if the total of good points minus bad points reaches a certain number. We do not go to hell if the total of bad points minus good points reaches a certain number. We do not go to heaven if the sum of good points exceeds the sum of bad points. We do not go to hell if the sum of bad points exceeds the sum of good points. How long we spend in heaven or hell does not depend on

our point total. We should stop thinking of points at all. God might have a long memory but he does not keep nasty little books like Scrooge. The Buddhist idea of points is usually translated as “merit”. There is no “merit keeping” either.

No Transfer.

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

No Karma.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You Deserve What You Get.

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

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

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

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

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

If something bad happens to us, it is not because God is angry with us and has punished us. That is called "blaming the victim". If something bad happens to a person, he-she should not feel guilty on top of the bad event, and should not search for some sin to make up for. If a girl is raped, that is bad enough; we cannot say she provoked it. If a hurricane hits Alabama, it is not because Alabama adopted a lottery. If I get a flat tire on the freeway, it is not because I yelled at my wife. In the same way, but in the other direction, if I win the lottery, it is not because I am especially good. If being good could win the lottery, I would be very good. The movies sometimes have nuns winning a big bet on a long shot in a horse race to save the convent-and-orphanage, but that does not happen in real life no matter how much we wish it would.

One version of this mistake is funny. After a town in Pennsylvania decided to keep Creationism out of its school textbooks, Pat Robertson warned them that God would send disasters such as storms, plagues, and earthquakes. Nothing happened, so maybe God approved of their decision and disagreed with Pat Robertson. During the Bush administration, America faced an unprecedented lineup of natural disasters including Hurricane Katrina, drought, and fires and mud slides in the West. In my head, I know this is only coincidence but sometimes, in my heart, I wish this were divine punishment for the arrogance and un-democratic conniving of bad Republicans. The fact that the problems continued under the Obama administration shows that it is not punishment from God. Instead, it can be taken as the just return on stupidly screwing up the ecology.

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

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

No "Instant Karma".

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

Mostly, though, return is delayed, and, often enough it does not happen at all. Especially God does not intervene to effect instant karma, and more especially God does not intervene to effect instant karma because we secretly deserved it, because we are secretly good or bad. God rarely punishes and rewards us now for our deeds in this life. God might punish and reward us in this life sometimes, but, if so, it is rare and it is beyond my knowledge. I know of no case that I can attribute to divine justice. We do have to reckon with God after we die, but not while still alive except in prayer. If we murder our bad neighbor with the yappy dogs, God does not punish us right now. If God did, there would be much less murder. If we save a drowning child, God does not reward us pretty quick. If he did, there would be many more heroic acts.

More than a Good Citizen.

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

The Greater Good Undoes the Lesser Good.

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

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

God Does Not Make You Rich.

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

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

Absolute Same.

In the movie series “The Matrix”, Agent Smith is the devil. Machines made him, but then he changed, and now not even his makers can stop him. His chief goal, and main technique, is to make everyone exactly like himself. When he has made everyone exactly like himself, then he no longer has to put up with the diverse smells and tastes of the pseudo-liquid-pseudo-organic matrix world.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I do not know any sure way out of this problem that preserves both diversity and group identity. I do not know how to draw the line between “Stepford Wife” versus “Queen of the Damned”.

Faith Is Not Enough.

As a young child, I participated in what was likely the greatest social psychology experiment ever. The Sunday Disney TV program showed the adventures of Peter Pan and Tinkerbell. One day, Tinkerbell was mortally wounded, I think poisoned, but not yet dead. The physical poison represented the spiritual poison that some children did not believe in fairies, not even in Tinkerbell. She would die unless all the children watching believed in her and believed she would recover. Only overwhelming faith could bring her back. I think we had to show our faith by clapping our hands at the right moment. Tinkerbell would hear, know the children believed in her, and know that they loved her. The faith and love of the children would save her. It must be true because she recovered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Faith and Works.

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

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

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

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

God Does Not Test Us.

I do not argue whether God knows us well enough so that he has to test us. Even if God did not know us well enough, to test us by shoving us into hardship would be cruel and unworthy. We are not hunting dogs so that God needs to see if we can stand the early morning damp and cold. Life is hard enough. It provides enough obstacles. God provided the world with hardships that would test our characters long before we were born; and without us particularly necessarily in mind. We find our way to the particular situations that give us in particular the hardest problems, something like the opposite of "Seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you". God can find out enough about us from watching us slog through life.

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

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

God Gives Us No More than We can Stand.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Not Merely in the Presence of the Lord.

In his book, "Till We Have Faces", C.S. Lewis tells about a group of people that have serious questions for God about justice, duty, why we should strive in life against so much hardship, and why we have hurt other people. The questions come out of their hard life experiences and their roles as public servants. They think they will see God someday because the sister of one of them has gone to live with God, and she promised to come back. When she and God do come back, the people do not bother to ask God the questions that once seemed so urgent. The mere presence of God is answer enough.

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

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

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

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

Some people do not even need the experience. They can understand the ideas and act on them without the extra urging. They do not need the presence of the Lord. They carry the presence of the Lord with them in a simple urge to be decent and help out. I think they are as lucky as the people that do have the experience.

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

God Does Not Harden Hearts or Abuse Innocents.

When the Hebrews were trying to get out of Egypt, God, through Moses, threatened Egypt with plagues if Pharaoh did not let God's people go. Pharaoh did not, so Egypt had to endure locusts, rivers of blood, and even the death of its firstborn male children. It is natural to ask why Pharaoh did not let the Hebrews go given the penalties the Egyptian people had to endure. The Bible says God "hardened the hearts" of the Egyptians (or at least Pharaoh) so they would resist God so God could show how powerful he was, how much he controlled any nation, and how much he favored the Hebrews.

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

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

God Does Not Soften Hearts: Grace.

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

Yet God does not soften hearts any more than he hardens hearts. If God softened the heart of anybody so as to make that person believe in him, then God would take away the free will of that person. God would take away the soul of that person. God would take away the very thing that God wanted to save. He would “destroy the village in order to save it”. By softening one heart but not another, God would act to favor one person but not favor other people. God would put the other people at a disadvantage. God would condemn some people by not giving them the help that he gave to a few special people.

The slogan for saving a person by softening the person's heart is “salvation through grace”.

Minimal Magic.

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

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

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

The Vehicle and the Message.

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

I believe this happened with Jesus' death and resurrection. They are the magic wrappers. They should get people to think about Jesus' teachings but instead people get stuck in the glitter of the wrappers. What does it mean to be forgiven and saved if we do not contribute to Jesus' mission? What good would it do to be resurrected to a world where Jesus' teachings do not matter? This stance is a kind of pyramid scheme. To focus on the wrapper while forgetting the pearl inside is actually a type of idolatry.

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

Salvation.

Being saved is getting the ideas of Jesus and doing what he wanted to the extent that we are able. I am not sure what it could be otherwise in Christianity. Whether salvation leads to heaven is irrelevant. Jesus asked us to follow him because it was the right thing to do and not so that we could go to heaven. There is no other useful idea of salvation.

Saved and Damned.

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

Not About Justification.

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

Sometimes the need to feel justified can lead to social good, as it did when Northerners agitated for the abolition of slavery in the United States. But the need to feel justified can lead to unusually great and widespread damage. People who go on crusades to feel justified to feel saved do great damage. People tempt their fellow sectarians with justification-for-salvation so that they can gang up to hurt other people and feel good about it. People go on moral crusades against welfare, gambling, abortion, or soft drugs so as to make themselves feel good without thinking about the freedom of other people and without thinking that the results might hit the poor hardest. People use justification-for-salvation as a way to hurt the poor. The poor use crusading for justification as a way to get benefits from the state and to get other people to feel guilty so they can control other people. Oppressed minorities in America use crusades of justification to make other groups feel guilty and to control other groups.

Seeking justification directly is an abuse. Jesus did not want us to be active so we could feel justified about ourselves. He wanted us to be active to build the Kingdom of God, to build a better world. The teachings of Jesus are not about justification. When seeking justification gets in the way of the teachings of Jesus or of building a better world, then seeking justification is wrong even if the cause it serves might be right otherwise. People need to get over the idea that they can feel justified because they work hard in a cause that might be right.

We need to think hard whether we are acting primarily to do good or to make ourselves feel better by making ourselves feel justified. We need to think about how we can be useful overall, and to pick where we can best help, rather than pick where we might better chase justification. We need to think about what all needs to be done, and how we can best use our energy and abilities. Good is good because it is good, not because it justifies you and gets you into heaven.

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

Miracles Prove Nothing Important.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Religion and Morality as Weapons.

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

PART 3: Logical Errors.

Not Everything from Nothing.

We can derive any silliness at all from nonsense, yet many religious dogmas seem like nonsense, and thus religious dogmas allow believers to claim anything as a result. We have to be careful. If the next two paragraphs annoy you, skip them, but stay in the section to read what follows them.

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

It is easy to see this peculiarity where the “if” statement is clearly false. We can do this by putting together two contradictory statements to make up the one statement in the “if” part: “If ([the sky is blue] and [the sky is not blue]), then the ball will fall”. What do we make of this? Logicians say this whole if-then statement is true. This is just strange, and seems like justifying nonsense with emptiness.

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

In religion, though, the connection can get obscure, we think the two parts are related even when they are not, we get anxious, and we get susceptible to manipulation. “If Jesus is God, then everybody who believes will go to heaven just because they believe, and then everybody who does not believe will go to hell just because they do not believe”. We cannot evaluate for sure whether or not Jesus is God, but we have to do something about the whole if-then idea anyway. It seems the whole if-then statement is true even if Jesus is not God, so it seems we have to accept the “then” parts. It seems that we are going to hell if we are not careful. We can't be sure we won't go to hell if Jesus is not God. So we better accept that Jesus is God so we don't go to Hell. We get confused and make mistakes.

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

This is why scientists insist that statements can be evaluated as true or false (if a statement can be evaluated as definitely false, that is enough; but we don't need to get into the topic here). Scientists need to know what conclusions we can draw from the statements and if we are liable to get confused. Since we cannot evaluate “If Jesus is God” then we have to be really careful about what conclusions we draw from it.

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

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

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

No Magic Formula.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The State as Our Agent.

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

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

The early Christians disapproved of abortion. They did not try to make their idea the law of the Roman Empire. They did not try to change the behavior of non-Christians. Instead, they went along with the basic rules of the Empire, did among themselves what they thought was right, and tried to change the minds of people who would listen. They kept their own stricter rules within their group and did not try to impose their own stricter rules on people in general. When Christianity became the official religion of the

empire, and Christians tried to impose their morality, a lot of things began to go wrong, some of which still haunt us to this day, such as laws against divorce.

We have to find which general moral rules we need the state to enforce. We need to find which rules we want to prevail in our group but which we do not necessarily want the state to enforce for us, such as rules against divorce. We have to let people who are not like us do as they wish even if what they do seems immoral and self-destructive to us, such as allow homosexual marriage or not allow anyone in their group to get a divorce. We have to not be obnoxious. It is not always easy to draw the lines.

Sometimes another group uses the state to impose its morality. Sometimes that morality hurts us and might even hurt the general welfare. If we really are threatened, we might have to defend ourselves, and we might have to use the state to defend ourselves. We might have to use the state to impose our ideas of morality so as to defend ourselves against a group that wants its ideas to prevail.

Fortunately, this situation arises not nearly as often as people fear. Unfortunately, people invoke this situation to generate fear to get what they want. People use fear to create artificial battlegrounds to get their own way. This is using religion and morality as weapons. Most argument over abortion is more about getting your own way than about protecting innocent babies or preserving freedom of choice. So we have to be cautious before deciding somebody else is using the state to hurt us, and we have to think hard about how to respond. It is better not to impose our own morality if we can help it, and especially better not to use the state.

“Say ‘Yes’ to Life”.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Worshipping Life and Nature.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Unbearable Joy of Infinite Happiness and Infinite Life.

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

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

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

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

Devil Worship.

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

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

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

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

Unity of Opposites.

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

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

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

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

No Magical Energy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dharma.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

17 Worlds 1

This chapter is the first of two chapters that describe themes in world views. The term “world” includes “world view” and everything that goes to make up reality, how we think about it, and how we live in it. A world entails a stance and every stance implies a world in which that stance makes sense.

Each view about what people are implies a world in which that kind of person makes sense. Each feeling or attitude implies a world in which that attitude makes sense. Selfish people look at the world in a way that makes sense of selfishness. Generous people look at the world in a way that makes sense of giving. People have hundreds of attitudes, each with its own world. Almost every work of art entails a world. The obvious examples are fantasies such as “Star Wars” but even a simple poem such as “Jingle Bells” makes us think of times and places. Every poem, song, movie, TV show, ad, and comic book is a world. Religions imply worlds. Each personal code requires a view that makes sense in a particular world. Romanticism is a world view. I can’t describe all worlds.

Very few people live by one world view, and no religion has only one world view. People mix world views to justify themselves in various situations. Religions mix world views to allow different kinds of believers to justify themselves or to allow believers in different situations to justify themselves. Not all world views are compatible. I don’t know how much people can hold to different world views at the same time; I don’t know how much people can live in different worlds at the same time. I don’t know the logical constraints of mixing different worlds.

Themes-stances-selves-views-attitudes-art-codes-religions-worlds do not work apart from ecologies, economies, societies, cultures, histories, etc. Some particular worlds etc. go well with some particular ecologies etc. The role of a theme can vary according to its setting. This is an important subject in social science but I cannot go into it.

Some of the worlds described in this chapter and the next might seem dated and irrelevant to our time, such as Gnosticism. In fact, all are relevant to our time. Gnosticism might have gotten its official label in the Classical World of Greece and Rome but it is a style of looking at the world, and people of our time still see the world in that style. The movie series “The Matrix” is almost pure Gnosticism. It takes too much space to describe how our time still uses older world views. I give some examples in which old world views are still alive now.

Right World.

People usually care less about knowing the variety of worlds than knowing which world is the right one. This question is not easy to answer. The simplistic material world of science is true but it is not the whole truth because it does not include how we think about the world. The simplistic answer is that the one right world is the world in which my idea of people and acts makes sense and in which alternatives make less sense: the teachings of Jesus, practicality, Western values about people and good government, science, enjoy the world, and make the world interesting. That answer is appealing but there is so much “wobble

room” that people still argue over the one right world. Even if these values are correct and the world in which they are the best values is the one right world, the one right relevant world differs depending on whether we think democracy will succeed or fail, if democracies fails then what takes its place, whether we can manage world ecology or the world will sink into a chemical pit, world climate is already beyond saving, income inequality grows worse, people become hugely dependent parasites of the state, business firms merge with the state, advances in biology change our basic nature, and so forth. I have no firm answers. All I can say is what I have said throughout the book: the set of values offered here is the best base to start from no matter what happens next. They imply a world in which they make sense, including the world as science finds out about it. In sections below, I give some criteria for deciding among world views but I can’t get any closer to one completely correct indisputable world view.

Self-Reinforcing World View.

See “self-validating experiences” from the earlier chapter on issues.

Major world views support themselves. Once you get inside a major world view, it is hard to get out. It is hard to invalidate a world from inside. It is hard to see other worlds at all, harder to see them as valid, easy to see them as derivative and deceptive, and hard to jump from this world to another. Paranoid people see the whole world as threatening, and the whole world becomes threatening. Self-reinforcing views are powerful tools of control. If you can get other people into a self-reinforcing world view that supports you above them, you can get them to do a lot for you; this is a theme in modern portrayals of serial killers and criminal masterminds such as Professor Moriarty, Hannibal Lecter, and Red John. Self-reinforcing world views are not well understood. Darwinists need to ponder how the ability to make self-reinforcing world views could have evolved, and what counter abilities would have evolved.

A self-fulfilling prophecy is like a self-reinforcing world view. An evil monarch hears that a child born in a certain village will grow up to overthrow him-her; he-she sends soldiers to kill all the children; one child escapes; the child learns about injustice and tragedy from the event; and so the child grows up to kill the tyrant. If the tyrant had done nothing, the tyrant would have been alright. Variations on this theme are in “Oedipus the King”, the stories of Moses, Jesus, David, and Robin Hood, in the movie “Red Sonja”, the TV series “Beast Master”, “Star Wars”, and “Harry Potter”. In real life but transformed by this kind of thinking: Mohammad befriends Jews and Christians, who then betray him. He rises again stronger than ever, and defeats his enemies. The Buddha’s father, a king, heard that his son would grow up to reject the world, so, to keep his heir, the father made sure the son grew up in ease. When the son finally left the palace for the first time to see the real world, his shock at the contrast led the future Buddha to reject the artificial palace world and the whole world. By trying to keep the son, the father drove away the son. John O’Hara based his novel “Appointment in Samarra” on this story: A man is in Bagdad. While visiting the market, the man sees Death staring at him with surprise. The man knows that Death intends to take him tonight, so he flees to Samarra. A second man asks Death why the surprise. Death was surprised to see the first man here in Bagdad during the day because he had an appointment with him in Samarra tonight. Fear of bank failure causes it. Fear of recession causes hoarding which causes recession. Confidence in the economy causes consumer spending and business investment, which lead to robust economic development.

Self-supporting world views often borrow on self-validating experiences. If we feel God's love personally, it is easier to support a world view of universal love. If we believe in secrets, it is easier to base a world on secrets. Usually I do not point out the self-validating experiences in a self-reinforcing world view.

Just because a world view is self-reinforcing does not mean it is wrong or right. In the classic novel and the movie "Catch-22", the hero, Yossarian, built a self-reinforcing paranoid world view, but he was correct. We have to judge what the world view says regardless of its source.

Relativism, Objectivism, and Proper Assessment.

Usually we have to "walk a mile in their shoes" to properly assess a way of life and world. We have to see as they do and live as they live. When we do, we run the risk of falling in and never being able to climb out. This is part of The Big Risk of Life, where we can wander paths that are hard to leave and can make mistakes that are hard to correct. Unless we take this risk, we are limited to a narrow range, not know much about life, badly misjudge people, and do little good. I believe Jesus wanted us to take this risk.

Even so, we cannot lapse into total relativity. We cannot blind accept all worlds just because somebody believes in them. Not all worlds are mutually compatible. Self-reinforcing worlds are not all correct just because we have to see them (at least partly) in their own terms. Not all roads to god are the same. Not all roads to god lead to the same god. Repressive totalitarian regimes are wrong. Oppression of women is wrong, even when women do it to women. Bullying and severe hazing are wrong even when part of a macho subculture or Black subculture. Part of learning about other world views (other cultures) is so that we can actually judge them when necessary.

Real Imaginary Games.

We have to open our imagination to see how world views are used. People do something odd with world views. World views often defy the normal laws of physics and biology but they do so to get things that we evolved to want. In video games, people can go faster than light, fly, shoot death rays out of their eyes, and have many of the impossible powers of Superman or Iron Man. What do they use their powers for? In the classic comic books, they fight for good and against evil. In games, they demolish enemies and get the beautiful girl or the hunky guy.

World views each have their own logic, and they share a common logic. Thinkers have not spelled out well either the logic of any particular world view or the common logic, so I can't go into the topic here. The common logic is based on a combination of reality, fantasy, wish fulfillment, evidence manipulation, and argument manipulation. If a world view is to appeal to real people with real needs, it has to touch on reality, and it has to be more than reality too. This is the same appeal that religion also must have, which is why religions imply worlds and world views imply religions.

To serve as a world view, a view has to be believable even if it is also slightly unrealistic. People have to enter a world-view before it can be self-reinforcing. Even if people are born into it, a world view has to be mostly believable or people will leave it. In the same way, games have to be believable and satisfying even

if they are not entirely realistic. The same things that make games believable and fun also make world views believable and compelling.

To really work, while we play a game, we have to get lost in the game. Even if we are only spectators, we tend to get lost in the game. Fans get lost in football games and basketball games. We have to be able to take on the role of characters just as football fans identify with a quarterback or mystery fans identify with the able beautiful police woman. The people we identify with are a mixture of real and super. If they were not both, we could not identify with them or we would not want to identify with them.

Games teach. Suppose you want to get people to live a certain way, find out certain things, and become certain kinds of people. What game would you design to get them interested, keep them interested, and teach them what you want them to learn? What does American football teach people, or golf? In the end, how would you wean them off the game back to reality so they could put into practice what they had learned and had become? This is not an idle question now. In the future, much of our education is likely to be through computer-based games. Now, the American military uses games to teach soldiers. The pilots who fly drones fly them from thousands of miles away using a console that looks very much like a video game.

In the chapter on issues, I said this life is not a mere game and that this life is as real as it gets. I stand by that opinion, but here it is useful to step outside dogma for a while and to consider worlds as if they were a game that teaches. Suppose any world is a game-like teaching tool? The first steps in assessing the world are these questions: (1) What is this world set up to teach, (2) how does it teach, (3) how are we assessed, (4) when do we graduate or “wake up”, and, (5) when we graduate or “wake up”, where do we go (6) do we stay in this game, (7) do we have to move to another game or another version, and (8) can we put into practice here what we have learned here?

More on How to Assess Worlds.

At first, assess worlds as if they were games for teaching, as above. Then, think of them not as games for teaching but as anything else that comes to mind that seems useful, fun, or appropriate.

A world should not be incompatible with the current real world unless it is an obvious fantasy world such as on the Sci-Fi channel. Yet we should not be too critical if a world is not obviously realistic in all points. It might sound counter-intuitive, but, just as a biased perception can be more effective than a completely accurate perception, people do not expect total realism from the worlds in which they live. People expect to be able to interpret their worlds so as to do well in particular situations. Worlds should be amenable to interpretation for success rather than totally realistic.

People use world views to explain the most important aspects of their lives to them. They want to know who is in families, what roles are in families, what other kinds of people there are, how everybody relates to everybody, what work is, when to go to work, what play is, when holidays arrive, how to behave during ordinary days and how to behave during holidays, etc. Again, worlds need not include all this information explicitly as long as they allow people to interpret and to make up as they go along without contradicting the basic world.

Most world views answer some particularly important questions: Why is life unfair? How is life unfair? Why is there evil? Why are there particular kinds of evil? Why is there so much evil? Is there anything we can do about unfairness and evil? How do we succeed in this life? If spirituality is part of the world, how do we succeed spiritually? What is the relation between spirituality, fairness, unfairness, and evil? Can we do anything to promote spirituality, fairness, and good?

As you become adept at thinking about world views, what becomes most relevant is what people do as a result of being in that world. How do you act? What are your values? Can you use those values in the world in which you learned them?

Do not expect worlds to be completely consistent, any more than works of art are completely consistent. People are amazingly adept at holding inconsistent views at the same time. Holding inconsistent views allows us to interpret in ways that permit us to do what we want; see below. I do not know of any single academic work that clarifies how consistent a world needs to be, what kinds of inconsistencies people can tolerate or not tolerate, and how much.

In all the worlds that seem relevant to me, the values are the same. We learn to act the same. We use those values in the world in which we learn them. We follow “do unto others” and “applies equally”. We work hard to make that world better. We act decently. We do not act indecently. We apply the teachings of Jesus combined with reality and practicality.

If this world is a game, it is an interesting and unusual game in that we do not leave the game when we “graduate” or “wake up”. We live in the same game we learned in, and we apply the same lessons we learned during the game to our further conduct in the game. That is not true of all games and all worlds. That result is what makes this world as real as it gets even if in some “airy-fairy” way this world is a game.

In this book, I am most interested in the issue of what worlds teach, especially what values they teach. I focus on worlds that have been historically interesting, that are currently important, or that are interesting to me for personal reasons.

Learning in the Face of the Big Risk.

The chapter on issues pointed out that we need to experience the bad things and bad people in life if we are to know how to respond, become fully human, and really help other people. To really understand how failed and broken people feel, to be really able to help them, or to leave them alone if that is best, we have to have been broken ourselves, at least somewhat. To understand a person in pain, we need to have felt pain ourselves. There is no other way. There is nothing glamorous about pain, getting broken, or failing. It just hurts.

Badness is dangerous. Failure gnaws your guts. Getting broken drains your life force. We really might become bad ourselves, break, never heal, or lose our bearings forever. Some people remain damaged. This is part of the great risk. People that have been scarred or lost should not think they understand and should not romanticize. Religions, maybe especially in the teachings of Jesus, offer people a way back but not everybody can take the offer even when they wish they could.

This problem makes us think about what kind of a world this one really is and about how we make up worlds to make sense of this world. This section works its way through the topic. This topic colors all ideas about worlds.

Some of us get hurt, fail, or break, and then do heal. Usually you cannot make up for the loss even if you heal. Even so, we who heal are the lucky ones.

The best we can do with our experience is to learn from it how to be good to people and nature. We can learn what really matters and what people really need. We can learn to overlook silliness and diversions. We can learn to focus on what makes a difference. If we are adept, we can learn how to shepherd other people through their hardship so they learn without turning bad, wearing scars, or getting broken. That is very hard to do but it is worthwhile when it can be done. As Roy Blatty said in the movie "Blade Runner", "I have seen battle cruisers on fire off the shoulder of Orion" and "To live in fear is to be a slave".

I could never have learned to be a better person if I had not suffered hurt people hurting me. I could never have learned to be a better person if I had not suffered bad people acting badly. I could never have learned to be better if I had not suffered bad people hurting me and hurting people close to me. I could never have learned enough if I had not been hurt, failed many times, and even been broken a few times. I had to have people use me. I would not understand isolation and pain if I had not been isolated and broken. I had to feel bitter to overcome bitterness. I had to get lost in bad bitter fantasies before I could learn to let go of them and to focus on living instead. I had to get hurt to know how bad it is when I hurt other people. I am naïve, slow, wooden headed, and stubborn, so I could not have learned any other way. Luckily, I was never broken so badly that I did not heal. I thank God for what I gained, that I did not do any worse damage, and was able to heal. My insight does not make me better than other people or much different than average. This is similar to what the Nathalie Portman character goes through in "V for Vendetta".

Regardless of what I have gained or how, I do not wish hardship on other people unless it is absolutely needed. If there are better ways to learn, I hope we all learn through those ways instead.

Some people who become bad deserve it. Some people ask for it. Some people choose to be bad. For them, I have little sympathy. They are lost, and deserve it. They are no longer the subject here.

Some people do not choose to be bad, and would undo hurt if they could. Some people who get lost or broken don't deserve as bad as they get. Nearly all people who are lost or broken would rather be found and healed. The undeserving lost and broken people pay the price for the rest of us. Most of them do not differ from us; they are only less lucky. There is no reason why they should suffer so badly while we suffer only as much as we do. I am not writing out of survivor's guilt. There is really a problem, and these people really do sacrifice for us. We need to appreciate them. The best ways we can appreciate them are by living well ourselves when we can and by helping other people. We can help the lost and broken people by helping other people. That is the message of the movie "Saving Private Ryan". I cannot explain why some people suffer so much, and why we should benefit from their suffering.

Christians represent Jesus as a man like this, who sacrificed himself for us. That is not all that Jesus did, but it is part of what he did. Jesus was deeply disappointed although I think he did not give up hope. So

Jesus likely knew what it means to be on the down side. I hope that, because Jesus knew, God knows too, even if Jesus was not God.

We also learn from bad people and we can benefit from bad people but that still does not excuse their badness. That does not explain their place in the world. I cannot explain fully.

It is not a good idea to seek bad experiences so we can learn from bad experiences. That is to glamorize hardship in a way that mocks people who really face hardship. Nobody should get raped just so he-she knows what other victims suffer. Nobody should get his-her legs blown off in a terrorist attack just so he-she can feel injustice and can understand hatred toward enemies. Nobody should watch his child go hungry just so he-she knows bitterness toward oppressors. No child should go hungry just so parents learn that they were selfish in having children when the parents were too young to support children or when the parents did not have enough skills and resources to support children. Usually the world gives us as much as we can take, and then more. If you want to learn about hardship, help people who are hard up.

Some people do live “under glass” “in the shade”, and it would be good for them, and for people around them, if they had more experiences, including some bad experiences. “Hot house” kids usually don’t do people much good. These people also usually are not well prepared to learn from hard experiences. When pushed out into the world unprepared, they turn vicious easily, even if they have somebody else waiting to bail them out of trouble. Then their experiences cause more bad than good. I don’t know how best to handle these people.

Parents face a problem. They can’t protect their children everywhere forever but they don’t want to risk that their children get scarred or broken, or turn bad. God has turned us out into this world to take our chances, so parents eventually have to follow God’s example, or they face the good chance their children will turn even worse in a different way. These days, parents look to the state to protect their children.

We can think God acts as if he were a big parent. God has set up this world to give us experiences from which we could learn but that are not likely to scar us, break us irreparably, or make us turn bad. If we break or turn bad, God offers us a way back. We could think of Earth as a training ground for sentient-moral beings that need to learn this way. This might be so. I can’t say for sure either way. I can note that the damage done too often exceeds the lessons learned. I doubt we could have real learning without some innocent people getting hurt or broken. I don’t know how to set up a world in which people could learn the deep lessons they need without some people hurting too much or getting broken. I don’t know what to make of this situation. We are tempted to find a way out of this dilemma by saying nobody really gets hurt, it is all a big game, like a video simulation, unreal, or embedded in a system of many lives. I reject these ways out.

Suppose, someday in the future, the world has turned out well, and there are no bad problems from which people can’t recover. We cure cancer, everybody has enough to eat, everybody can find a job that pays enough to raise a family, kids get sorted out properly at school, dogs don’t bite, etc. Then how do people learn deep lessons about themselves and life? In this imaginary world, they might not need such deep lessons, but, then, they will not be fully human. They will miss something important, like the people in the novel “Brave New World”. This situation might actually arise. If it does, people might construct simulators

based on case histories from the past so they can learn what it was like to be fully human back in the good-old-bad-days. For the simulators to really do the job, people have to believe life is really real, pain really hurts, and scars are permanent, while they are in the simulated world.

If you could do anything, could make any world, how would you prepare your children, and how would you lead them to learn what it means to be fully human and to fully connect with other people and with nature? What kind of a world would you make so people could teach each other and help each other? Could you do it without some real casualties? Are you willing to take the chance that some of those real casualties will be your own children? If you are not willing to take that chance, then how can people learn what is really real and what is really important? How can they become fully human?

(1) Many Lives and Many Places

Recall the contrast between believing this life is our one real life versus the believing in many lives. This section, and the following five numbered sections, six in all, use this issue to show how different visions of the world make a difference.

Rather than argue in the air, it is easiest to go after the problem with a fantasy. We pick up with the need to learn about life. Return to the scenario from above but here with a different goal. You are the parents of three 12-year old children. You live in a nice safe comfy boring suburb. All your children ever see are people like themselves: ethnicity, religion, wealth, interests in TV, movies, music, and sports. If the kids don't learn more about life, still they will succeed by most external standards, such as jobs and marriage, but likely they will start using drugs as teens and then graduate to alcohol as adults. They will fail in the deep way you want for them. Besides, if they don't learn more about the variety of people directly from life, then they are likely to learn their morality from TV, movies, music, and other art; and they will be easy victims to religious, ethnic, and political scams. To teach them life lessons, you need to do more than just drive by other parts of town and point out other kinds of people. What do you do?

Imagine we can play around with time. We can give the children "time outs", and, in time outs, time goes by only at one-tenth normal speed. When time outs are over, life resumes at regular speed.

We want the children to learn about other people and other ways of life. We want them to learn not just in theory or by acquaintance but deeply. To learn deeply, the children have to actually live the lives of other people, among other people, in the places where other people live, interacting with the people, getting sucked into their world, and getting stuck in their world. The children have to live other kinds of life long enough so that other kinds of life are about as real as the present life. The children have to become other kinds of people for a while. They need not forget who they once were but they have to know they cannot run away to safe haven until their time is up living among other people in other ways. They have to be committed to the life that they find themselves living even if they know it is not the only way, deepest way, or best way. In its own briefer way, this was the theme of the old TV show "Quantum Leap".

(A) So, for two years at a stretch, we send the children to live as bankers, retail checkout clerks, farmers, moms with five kids, DINKS ("double income no kids"), single parents, under dictatorships, Jews if they are Muslims, Muslims if Jews, careerist academics, sports heroes such as famous quarterbacks, linemen in the NFL with four-year careers and broken knees, movie stars, talented but unglamorous actors who

have to take character roles to live, in a Black neighborhood if White, in a White neighborhood if Black, unemployed, gay, straight, gangster, leftist community worker, conservative zealot, etc. We pick ten ways of life for them for a total of twenty years. After twenty years, the children come back to their original way of life, where they have aged only two years, are 14-years old, and resume regular lives.

Hopefully that should do it. Hopefully eventually they learn to live as a good person in almost any way of life they find themselves. They will make mistakes. In one particular life, they might choose to be a hard-ass gangster. Still, eventually they should come to appreciate their previous suburban life. They might not choose it as their permanent way of life but they will more deeply appreciate whatever way of life they do choose, and they will be a better person in whatever way they do choose. If not, then we give up on the child.

(B) In my version of this story, there is one real life, and that is all. This life counts. It is the only life that counts. It needs to count for something more than mere worldly (evolutionary) success. There is no suburban base camp with chances to sample other lifestyles during time out lives. Different people in different situations here live different lifestyles but they are all in the same big life arena. We can live other lifestyles through empathy and through really living them temporarily, as when we work a different job. Hopefully we get really adept at empathy. We always come back to our one real life because we never really leave it. Hopefully we learn to be a good useful person in this life. There are universal moral standards that can apply to any lifestyle, such as “applies equally” and the Golden Rule. Life is set up to teach us about various lifestyles within it, if we will learn. Most situations inside this one real life allow us to be good enough. Some life situations make it hard to be good, and easily lead people to selfishness and delusion. I don’t know how to teach all people so that everybody succeeds at what counts. If God acts like the parents above, and gives some people other chances, that story is between him and them. We cannot all expect that.

(C) There are many alternative “time out” lives, but there are no good parents to watch over children, and there is no difference between lives lived in happy suburbia versus lives in the time outs. Each life is equally valid and invalid. Every life counts in its own meager way, and thus no life really counts in the way that we want. There might be some “game” of many lives in which all particular lives are embedded but there is no safe haven base life. There is no good-hearted parent to guide you in-and-out of lives and to move you continually on to better lives. There is only a never-ending march of lives.

(C) Continued: We can’t be sure the whole march of lives is moral, immoral, amoral, fun, boring, real, or not real. Whatever all particular lives are embedded in can’t be a life like any particular life. We can only ever know one life at a time, the life we are in. You can’t live in the whole march of lives. You can only use the standards of this particular life you are in to judge this life or anything. The standards of any one life do not apply to the whole march of lives, and so we don’t have any standards by which to judge the whole march of lives. We cannot say for sure if we learn lessons from one life that we can apply outside of that one life to other lives, and if we continually grow to become good people. If that cannot be determined, then, for all relevant purposes, we don’t learn any lessons from one life that we can apply to the whole march of lives. For all relevant purposes, we can’t say the whole march of lives is a whole system, good, bad, fun, boring, real, or unreal. Some people do say they have seen the whole march of lives, that the whole march of lives is a system, is good, is joyous, and is realer than any one life; but we can’t know that while we are in this particular life.

Most people don't like either (B) or (C). So they modify a version to suit their desires.

From (C): On the one hand (D), if we live many lives, people want the whole business to be real, good, satisfying, and worthwhile even if sometimes particular lives are not very satisfying and even if no one particular life is as real as the whole cavalcade. The game-of-lives is real and good, and it allows the chance to be good into each particular life. The game-of-lives is like a good benevolent parent. Each life is real in its own way even if the game-of-lives is a realer than any one particular life. Not all lives are equally good. We can progress through lives to become better and better. We can live as many lives as it takes until we are good people and we are all saved. Bad lives are steps to good lives and are steps toward seeing the whole game as good. We are like the children above; and Dharma, or God, is like a parent who teaches by giving the children many lives.

From (B): On the other hand (E), people who think we live this one life only, and are religious, want this life to be a prelude to heaven or hell. Heaven or hell is the real life, the one that really counts. God is a good parent but he gives us only one particular life here. One life here is all we need. This life counts because it is the prelude to the real life in heaven or hell, the life that really counts. If you have only one ticket to the movies, that ticket really counts. Everyone has enough free will and mental skill so he-she can succeed at being a good person no matter his-her particular situation.

From (B): On another hand, (F), moralistic atheists combine morality and one life. This life is intrinsically satisfying without recourse to heaven or hell, despite the fact that some lives here certainly appear not to be satisfying. Everyone has enough free will and mental skill so everyone can succeed at being a person no matter his-her own particular situation. Moral success in this life is enough reward in itself.

We can divide the approaches into "one real life" versus "many semi-real lives". Along that divide, I take the "one life" approach (B) while I oppose "many lives" (C and D). I want this life to count. Yet I dislike "one life" approaches with dogmatic rigidity (E), such as Christianity and Islam, and that disallow me to speculate about God (F) such as moral atheism. This life is not primarily a prelude to heaven or hell. If we think of it that way, we will waste it. I want us to use our imagination, empathy, and sympathy to live many lives through seeing other people, not directly ourselves. While a moral life here can be intrinsically satisfying, my imagination leads me to wonder about God, and I see no reason to stifle my imagination.

I sympathize with "many lives" stances that see the whole system as a good parent giving us chances we can do the best with who we are (A). Yet stances (D) that try to save the reality and morality of particular lives in a system of many lives degenerate into the idea that all particular present lives don't really count (C). You can do what you want in this particular life because there is always another chance. "Here" is not so real as to count fully. If every particular life in the game-of-all-lives doesn't fully count, then the whole game-of-all-lives can't be moral either. Holding to (D) is a way of pretending to be moral and super real while not really being moral or real at all.

(2) Optional Fussy Technical note.

If you say people have many lives, it seems you can also say whether many lives are part of a system, and whether the system is moral, amoral, immoral, worthwhile, boring, joyous, real, or unreal. But this is

not necessarily so. Those are all judgments within particular lives that can apply only to particular lives. The judgments might not apply to any system if there is a system. Just because someone says he/she can sense there is a system of many lives does not mean we can know much about it.

People argue for a system of many lives because it helps explain evil and helps explain differences in abilities, wealth, position, power, luck, family, spiritual advancement, insight, etc. Even if people have many lives, that fact can explain such things only if it is also inherently a system, moral, and realer than any particular life. If there is a system and it is moral and strongly real, that also implies the system is worthwhile and fun. None of that is necessarily so. People who believe in God do not usually believe that God is incoherent, crazy, evil, and took no joy in his creation. People who believe in God usually also believe God has a coherent personality, is good, strongly real, makes life worthwhile, and makes creation enjoyable. As with God, people who believe in many lives also believe it is a system, is good, and is strongly real; some people also believe it is worthwhile and joyous. If we accept God, it makes sense to accept the other ideas too. In contrast, to me, even if we accept many lives, it does not make as much sense to accept the other ideas too. It is not clear what we can say about many lives even if we accept many lives.

The strict “undeterminable” “many lives” stance (C) is held only by a few unusual skeptics (I can’t think of any now), and it is not an important feature of any religion. It appears in fantasy stories in which people use drugs or machines to create dream worlds. Religions that use “many lives” ignore (C) while holding to (D). “Many lives” advocates usually do not see that (C) is the logical base; you have to explain how to get from (C) to (D); (D) tends to fall back to (C); or (D) tends to lose attributes. Weirdoes say the system of many lives is incoherent, crazy, bad, painful, or unreal. Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, and Hinduism all take stance (D); they take the system, morality, and strong reality for granted; they take the Dharma for granted. Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism also take for granted that the system is worthwhile and joyous. Theravada Buddhism does not take for granted that the system is worthwhile or joyous; in fact, it says the system is full of suffering.

(3) Assessment: More Comments on Strengths and Weaknesses.

The many lives stance offers a plausible explanation of unfairness and badness. It also makes people complacent about any particular life and makes them morally lax. We don’t need to develop imagination, empathy, and sympathy. We don’t need to wonder about other people. If spiritual reckoning comes only later, we might as well use this life for pleasure and worldly success. If unfairness gets taken care of later, then we can be as unfair and selfish now as we want. We are not really hurting anybody; we are not really hurting ourselves. If we don’t help a needy person, then that’s the way it goes. If we are rich, good looking, powerful, and have a successful family, we should just enjoy it without worrying about other people. If we are poor, it is alright to scabble, bite, and cheat our way up. It is alright to look down on people who are less successful, less educated, poor, sick, suffer bad luck, suffer mental problems, born in bad places, born in other religions, or born where people don’t believe in many lives. We don’t have to work hard for a better world because that problem will take care of itself. We don’t have to protect nature.

Not all people who take the many lives approach lapse into selfishness. A few people take seriously the idea that their deeds will catch up with them sooner rather than later (karma), and act well. A few take seriously empathy and sympathy.

The “one life” stance has trouble explaining unfairness and badness. When it does not combine with the idea of meeting God, then it can lead to selfishness: If I only have this life, then I might as well “look out for number one” and get all I can. When we have only one life, stakes are high. We have to succeed or fail right now. So we get “hardnosed” about life. Then, we get selfish, moralistic, or zealous. The idea of one life does not always lead people to morality, imagination, empathy, and sympathy. When the idea of one life combines with the right idea of meeting God after we die, then it can lead to living well. When the idea of one life combines with the idea that morality is important regardless of God, as in the moralistic atheism of David Hume, then it also can lead to living well.

A person can believe in many lives but live each life as if it were the only life, as if each life would lead to a reckoning with God, or can live each life with moral commitment regardless of God. That doesn't happen often. If you think you can get away with this approach, likely you can't.

If this world-life is the only life, and we take the right attitude, then we can wake up in this life (graduate the game), find the right values, and live by the right values in this one world-life. The right values are, of course, Jesus' message mixed with realism and practicality.

If we believe in many lives in a system, it is not clear if we can wake up in this life, what values we wake up to, we can use those values to live in this current life, or use those values to live in the system of many lives. People who believe in a system of many lives do offer good values to live some lives by for some particular lives, as in the Bhagavad Gita when Krishna advises Arjuna to live by the code of an aristocratic warrior. But the values for any one particular life are not necessarily the appropriate values for the whole game-world of many lives, and it is not clear what the appropriate values are for the whole game-world. It is not clear that every life can wake up to the right values unless Krishna is standing by to advise them. A holy person might wake up to a clear set of values. But a holy person does not live by the same code as an aristocratic warrior, and it is not clear that the values of a holy person are the right values for the whole game-world of many lives. The values of any particular life, or for the whole game-world of many lives, are not necessarily Jesus' message mixed with realism and practicality. To the extent that I understand religions that use a many-lives world, the values for the whole game-world often do not apply to any one life within the game. (1) It seems that the ultimate value is to opt out of the game entirely, and to opt out of any particular life-world. (2) Sometimes the value for the whole game of lives-world is to bask in the never-ending joy of the whole game. In both alternatives, it is not clear what the values are for any one particular life, if there are any values for particular lives, and, if there are, how we live by them in particular lives. Keep all this in mind for later chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism.

(4) More Fun and Games.

I invite you to make up your own “many lives” world-game fantasy (A, C, or D) to see what you think and where you fall. See if you can get people in that world, and its many lives, to live morally. Try this: Instead of other “real” lives as in (A) above, you find engrossing incredibly realistic video games that mimic ways of life. Your children spend hours every day on them. Within a game, reality and morality do not necessarily have to hold as in our world. They could be different, or not hold at all. Just as, in a game, a person can defy the laws of physics, so a person can kill with abandon and not fear worldly retribution or a talk with God. What kinds of game would you want your children to play? How would you

get them to play only those games, and to avoid others? How would you get them out of the games into something better, like real life?

(5) Beauty.

“Many lives” images often are beautiful, both intrinsically and because they give us hope. Still, I find the image of “many places” more beautiful: planet Earth is not the only planet to have conditions conducive to life; life evolved on many planets; sentient-moral-aesthetic life evolved on some other planets; planet Earth is not the only beautiful world; many other planets are beautiful; and many other places in the universe are beautiful even if they are not planets with life. God enjoys the beauty and grace of his many places whether the sentient-moral-aesthetic life anywhere succeeds in keeping the beauty and grace or not. If, on at least a few planets, sentient beings do succeed in keeping the grace and beauty, then that is even better.

Enjoy the beauty of many places without succumbing to the beauty of many lives. This advice is not as hypocritical as it sounds. Almost certainly there are many planets. It is far from certain there are many lives. We might be able to appreciate directly other planets someday, and there is even a dim chance we might travel to some. We can't appreciate the beauty of many lives unless we die repeatedly, and, even then, unless we can remember previous lives, we might as well have only this one life. “Many lives” is all about you; it seems selfish; while “many places” is all about many places and God's creativity. “Many places” goes along with the feeling that we are only a small part of something much bigger yet we are still important. “Many lives” implies we are always the focus even when we are in a system. I think the promise of many lives lends itself to religious mistakes too easily. It is easy to get lost in the promise of many lives and so forget the tasks and joys of this life. Even if many lives is true and beautiful, you are better off to focus on this one life here in this place now.

Deterministic World.

I now return to describing various worlds. Use the standards from above to assess these worlds both from the point of view that they could be teaching games, and otherwise.

I mention this world view here first get it over with. I described this world view in a previous chapter on selves, so I don't say much here. In this view, everything is governed entirely by natural laws, an idea that is probably true. Everything is determined entirely by natural laws, so that if we knew enough about the condition (state) of anything now, we could accurately predict its state later. Everything is a kind of machine, although not always like a car or a wind-up toy. It is not needed here to know about different kinds of machines, some of which depend on probabilistic laws. Most importantly, everything is equally interesting or uninteresting. There is no qualitative difference between any machines. People are not special. Selves and morality are not special. There is no reason to follow morality or not follow it other than that we were evolved to follow it.

I like the reductionist view. I hold this view inadequate not because it is deterministic but because different “machines” (clouds, flowers, bears, computers, scientific method) are qualitatively distinct and because the existence of such things as morality point to a mind that ordered this world. I think people

are qualitatively from rocks, and morality is qualitatively distinct from the smell of bananas, are that the qualitative distinctions are important.

A reductionist world view can be at odds the view of with normal people, who accept as real things such as colors, love, birds, persons, and justice. Normal people think of qualitative things as in-themselves, with some autonomy from formal laws. Description in terms of formal laws does not necessarily explain things or get at what is most important about them. Normal people fear that deterministic accounts of qualitative things explain them away as “nothing but”.

Take the atoms and energy that are in a car, and then rearrange them into another car without adding or subtracting any matter or energy. You have two different cars. Take the atoms and energy in a person, and then rearrange them to make another person. It makes a difference.

Except for a few physicists who habitually think in terms of basic matter-energy-space-time-movement-symmetry etc., most scientists do not think rigorously in reductionist terms even if they give lip-service to the idea. Instead, each scientific field has its set of basic objects and relations that they use to analyze other objects and relations in their field. The basic objects are the qualitative things of their world out of which they make deterministic relations. Biologists have genes and natural selection as their basic qualitative “objects”, which they use to explain the behavior of cheetahs and gazelles. Biologists do not reduce genes and natural selection to atomic particles and their relations, and, in fact, probably could not. This situation does not invalidate scientific thinking. It shows how scientific thinking and normal thinking can mix to produce a powerful way to explain the world.

To repeat from the chapter on selves: I can think in both ways without going crazy. The ability to do this is what makes persons qualitatively distinct and interesting. The fact that people can see these issues at all tends is strong evidence that people are qualitatively distinct things; that is, the world has qualitatively distinct things, among which one is “persons”. Persons have world views as part of their selfhood.

Good Wins, Maybe.

For most people, it matters that good wins in the end. If good will not win, then fighting for good is still worthwhile but the fight feels different. It also matters how good will win. Good cannot win by bad means or even by force. Ideally good should win through appeal and voluntary action because it is good. Any other way to victory, such as force and domination, actually undermines the victory

Maybe neither good nor evil ever win. The world might just drag on as a “mixed bag” the way it usually has. People who want good to win usually find this option depressing.

Maybe neither good nor evil ever win because good and evil depend on each other. Good and evil are merely aspects of the same thing. The fact that neither good nor evil ever win is a better outcome than if either won, a better outcome than if good won decisively in a good way. At the least, it leads to a more interesting world than if either definitely won.

Other sections in this chapter, and later chapters, look at these options.

The World is Fallen.

The stance in this section restates in Christian terms a common idea. The world feels like crap a lot of the time. What if evil has already won? Power, greed, lust, lying, and stupidity dominate. Then what should we do? What still matters in that kind of world? Most people don't feel this way about the world anymore, even when they get unhappy with the world. Maybe a little surprisingly, people who do feel that the world has fallen also tend to feel even more strongly that good matters and that they should continue to do good. They do not look to do good in big ways but still work for good in little ways.

People who think the world has fallen continue to do good for two reasons that are mixed up. The first reason is that good is good in itself, and we should do it anyway regardless of how the world is and what happens to us and our families. The second reason is that God commands us to do good anyway. Even if God allowed the world to fall, he still wants us to do good. Good matters to God, so it matters to us. Among the people I have met who think the world is fallen but continue to do good, they publicly stress the will of God. To me, on the outside, it seems as if they have a sense of goodness based on their humanity and on their upbringing, and they want to act on the sense of goodness even if officially they believe that the world is fallen and evil.

My Version of a Fallen World.

Through talking to people who believe the world is fallen, I saw that I differ from them even though I have grown pessimistic. This section restates earlier material. Christians and Muslims who believe this Earth is fallen also tend to think the whole universe is fallen. All creation has turned evil. In contrast, I think this particular planet will not turn out nearly as well as it could have, and should have, but that sad fate does not mean all creation is evil or that this planet is evil. This planet is merely graceless and tacky with some instances of evil. Most of what happens here is not evil even if overall it is annoying. Other planets might turn out well. Other planets might turn out worse. Even if no planet in this particular universe turns out really well, God still gave all sentient beings here a fighting chance. This world turned out as it did not because of the revolt of Lucifer or the bad choice of Adam and Eve but because the large majority of evolved human beings are too narrow-minded to make decent self-government work. That fact is terribly sad, but it is not the same as a cosmically fallen evil universe.

Illusory World that Still Matters.

We do not have a completely accurate perception of the world. Nearly everything we experience is partly illusory: stars, genes, people, chairs, sunsets, love, children, hope, scientific method, good government, relationships, etc. That does not mean they are pernicious evil delusions or that there is nothing to them. There is something to most things in world, and they matter even if they are illusory. Importance can work even through illusionary things. Usually we can tell the difference between the normal illusoriness of worldly things, things that are more illusory, delusions, evil delusions, and delusions that are made by bad beings to further their evil.

I can pick apart the idea of a scissors so that the idea is hopelessly fuzzy and all scissors seem like sad illusions. Even so, when I want to cut a piece of paper, I reach for a pair of real scissors. The scissors is not solid and is made mostly of space, but it is real enough, it is real enough as a scissors, and it has its

uses. When I get hungry, I eat real food, even if somewhat illusory real food. When I want to figure out something, I use illusory logic and illusory scientific method, and they seem to work fairly well. I assume that the speed of light is real even though nothing material has ever gone that fast. Justice might be hard to pin down but I think it is real enough so that we ought to pursue it, we do sometimes achieve it, and I am happy when we do.

Unfair World.

Whether the world is good or bad overall might still be an open question but there is little doubt that it is unfair. Realizing the world is unfair, and carrying on anyway, has been a major theme of movies since the 1980s, so I won't dwell on it here. Is the world still worthwhile? That depends on how unfair it is, but the world seems to be fair enough so that often it is still worthwhile.

There is a difference between saying the world is unfair sometimes to particular individuals versus saying the world in general is unfair to nearly all people much of the time. The world does have a few particular cases of Job but most people don't seem to be Job. Of course, if you are Job, then the world seems all-in-all unfair, probably not worthwhile, and sometimes meaningless. I am not sure how unfair the world is as a whole. It seems not to be so unfair that most people can't count on their efforts to make a difference in their own lives, and so that most people think the world is not worthwhile. Most people still count on their own efforts and think the world is worthwhile despite unfairness.

Deeper Delusion.

People can deal with the fact that we do not experience the world immediately with total accuracy. We are used to that kind of illusion, and it really is not much of a problem.

The world can be illusory in other ways that are a problem. These ways have to do with the world being sticky and with our tendency to commit to things such as spouse, children, house, neighborhood, friends, job, church, country, and success. Unfortunately, religions in which this idea is important, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism, are not always clear about it. The list below illustrates ways in which we can be deluded about the world and in which our delusion ensnares us into acting badly toward ourselves and toward the world. Later instances depend on earlier instances. A person adept at this knowledge might not agree with my ranking. The list owes much to Hinduism. The end of this section comments on the nature of this kind of delusion.

-Not everybody in the world is the same. To think everybody in the world is the same and deserves the same is simply foolish. You have to accept difference between people and different fates for people. That does not mean you have to treat people badly. You treat them according to their ability and to what they have made of their ability. To deny differences in people is delusion.

-If you can understand this book, then you are probably more astute than other people. You are part of a group of spiritually elite people. You can be born into this group, or you can learn its ways. Mostly likely, both forces are at work. To deny the existence of the elite group, and to deny that you belong to the elite group, is to continue the delusion of everybody being the same.

-Some people are obviously screwed up and trapped even if they don't feel it, such as Gordon Gecko of the "Wall Street" movies before he was rehabilitated. "Users" and "enablers" are like this. People in these situations invent fantasies that justify their situations, much as serial killers invent fantasies that justify their actions. Popular media is aware of this problem but has not really explored it well.

-Some people are screwed, trapped, and feel it, but don't know how to get out. Usually they are trapped by false ideologies that they have made up in the past or have adopted from other people.

-Most people are not aware of the deep reality of morality. We just don't really feel it yet. If we felt what it means to do wrong, we would seriously consider before we did wrong. We are not aware how wrong it is to hurt other beings, including animals. We can treat other people well even if we recognize that not all people are the same right now.

-Sometimes we place far too much importance on some things while placing far too little importance on other things. We "have our priorities screwed up." Even being too moralistic can be screwed up. People who are screwed up in this sense are not as obviously screwed up as a serial killer but they also invent rationalizations and they are just as trapped. This has been a common theme in Western popular media since the 1930s at least, but it is still true.

-Even people who understand morality and have good priorities can mistakenly expect more satisfaction from the world than it really gives. There is some satisfaction in family, friends, success, and other human goals but they cannot give deep lasting satisfaction. Everything fades, and even they will fade over time, even after you are dead. Evolution has led us to commit to "the good life" and to invent rationalizations of "the good life". The rationalizations are not distorted like that of a serial killer or of a person whose priorities are "all screwed up" but they are not entirely accurate either. They block us from seeing the world accurately, and they lead us to commit to the world. Religions are a strong source of rationalization and inaccurate commitment.

-One way in which we mistakenly think we can seek satisfaction is to mistake quantity for quality. We know that an ordinary reputation is not worth seeking but if we win three Nobel Prizes, then that is worth the effort. If our reputations endure (are measured to be big) then it is satisfying. If we have a large enough estate, we can endow our descendants for four generations, and that is surely enough to be satisfied. Scientists measure things in the mistaken belief that they can find the source of values and of being. Yogis and mystics think they can master the world through greater more rigorous practices. We have to look beyond the quantities of the world to the qualities in the world before we can start to evaluate the qualities.

-Although people are not the same right now, they might have the potential to be the same eventually in the future. Whether this is true depends on how we understand past, present, future, karma, and the rules of the universe (dharma). In any case, it is a trap to look down on other people because they are not now as advanced as you are, and it is a trap not to recognize the links between you and other people of all levels.

-Even people who have given up seeking deep satisfaction can still think this world is worth committing too. They are like parents who take care of their children even though they know the children could die or

could fail. They are like good politicians who take care of a city even though they know the city is full of common people who are not much better than crooks. They are like good shepherds who take care of a flock of sheep for another master because they really care about the sheep even though they know the sheep are destined for somebody else's table.

-People who really see the delusion in committing to this world tend to treat the world like a game. They play the game because they are in it but they don't care about winning or losing. Yet even these people mistakenly think the game is important or worth playing. If this version of the game is not worth playing then no version of the game is worth playing. No game is worth playing.

-Even if the game is not worth playing, we are in the game for now anyway. To opt out of the game by killing yourself is really just to be committed to a negative version of the game and therefore still to be committed to the game. It is like trying to be cool by being an anti-nerd. To respond by skepticism, even deep skepticism, also seems like play a version of the game by playing an anti-game. If they game really is not worth playing but we are in it, then how do we act? To answer this question is to strip away about as much delusion as can be stripped away.

It is important to understand that delusion and entrapment do not arise because the world is false, fake, empty, a cheap illusion, or a false creation. We are not fooled because of a magic trick. We are not fooled because the world is like a movie with computer graphics that make the physically impossible seem real. We are fooled because the world is sticky and we don't know how to maneuver properly between threads of the spider's web. We crawl along the strands or we get stuck entirely. People do not usually get caught because they are bad but because they are mildly good. It is not bad to love family, friends, job, and country but all of those can be dead ends. All are dead ends if you do not see beyond them. This is the mistake of "family values" Christians; and this is what Jesus warned against. It is not bad to enjoy a golden sunset or a plate of fruit but it is a trap to think that is what the world is all about. Hindus sometimes use the term "maia" ("maya") for delusion and use the term "samsara" for the world of delusion. Japanese Buddhists call the world of delusion the "floating world". Some of the greatest visual art ever done, Japanese woodcuts, the Japanese call "images from the floating world".

"Animism" or "Many Minor Spirits among Us".

This is the world view of a lively world with many spirits. I described it in Chapter Two on evolution. I do not repeat here. Because we all share this view to a large extent, I leave it to the reader to use intuition.

This is the most important world view, and ultimately underlies religion. The historical modifications of this world view often became more important than the original simple version of this world view, as when this world view gave rise to the scientific world view and gave rise to major religions such as Buddhism and Christianity. Despite the modifications, this view, in its basic form, is still the most important world view and the most pervasive world view. It survives as the most common belief system in the middle of all major world religions.

I think many anthropologists would disagree with me on the following point: Modern people treat some things as spirits even if they do not overtly think of them as spirits. Scientists treat reductionism and mechanics as a spirit. Lawyers treat laws and legal procedure as a spirit. Business people treat their

business, and the idea of commerce, as a spirit. Churches goers treat their church as a spirit. Christians treat the Christian church as a spirit. If we think of all spirit worship as idolatry, then many modern people are idolaters. I do not pass judgment on this.

Veneration of the Saints.

We can see this world view in many modern forms although we do not recognize it as such.

The Roman Catholic Church, all Orthodox churches, and some Protestants, venerate (worship) saints. By any reasonable standards, saints are spirits. Even if they once had a real human identity, that has long since become less important than their identity as spirits. They are the spirits of good luck, finding lost objects, gardens, houses, children, widows, etc. In pre-modern times, the saints lived in particular awesome places; the awesomeness of the place and awesomeness of the saints reinforced each other. Their relics have intrinsic power, or mana, and are dangerous, or taboo. The saints are spirits with which people can have a relation. Most of the religious life of Christians until recently was conducted with saints and their local parish priests rather than with Jesus or God. People forged a relation with the saint by giving the saint devotion (bhakti) and small gifts, in return for which the saint gave protection and good fortune. Roman Catholics venerate the Pope almost as a powerful spirit. Greek Orthodox people used to treat archbishops and patriarchs much the same way as Roman Catholics treat dead and living Popes.

Even in religions, such as Buddhism and Islam, that are careful about not deifying founders, important figures take on the status of powerful spirits. To many Muslims, Mohammad, Ali, Omar, and the figures in the early history of Islam are spirits with which they can forge a relation. Most Mahayana bodhisattvas are spirits in this sense.

Some Protestants treat founders as if they were powerful spirits with whom they could form a relation. Americans treat John Wesley, Mary Baker Eddy, and Cotton Mather, and even Billy Graham, much the same way that Roman Catholics treat their saint-spirits. Regrettably, some American Protestants seem to treat TV preachers as if they were saint-spirits with whom they could forge a relation and get gifts.

Americans who make fun of religious veneration of saint-spirits have their own version of spirits, some of them like saint-spirits. I have heard Darwinists speak of Darwin, Ronald Fisher, and William Hamilton as if they were saint-spirits: if you read these great thinkers diligently, you get something mystical in return. Living Darwinists aspire to be raised to this semi-divine status. Popular books on science treat Darwin, Newton, Einstein, the founders of quantum mechanics, and, lately, Stephen Hawking, this way. Popular books on mathematics revere Newton, Euler, and Gauss as more-than-human. Musicians all have their own little gods, some of which can seem more-than-human. Followers treat politicians as mystical saints with whom the follower can forge a relation simply by making a donation.

The Greco-Roman Classical world was more honest about this tendency of people. It openly allowed the deification of important people such as emperors, and encouraged the common people to worship deified people and to form a relation with them.

The World Is As It Is.

This is another way to say this world is as real as it gets. However the world came to be as it is, whether created out of nothing by no god, or evolved along the plan of one good God, it is as it is. The world is made of people, animals, trees, weather, food, water, rocks, soft stuff, hard stuff, energy, colors, and everything that is obvious. Yes, there are forces that underlie what we experience but that does not mean the world is not as it is.

We have to adapt to the world as it is, seek success within the limits of this world, and with the chances given us by the world. Don't fight the world. Don't try to remake the world along idealistic lines that are generated primarily out of your brain alone. You may strive hard for an ideology, and you may strive hard to make the world better. If the world has what you want, and you can get it by moral means, then use the world to get it. If God created this world this way, then he wanted it this way, and he wanted us to find success in the terms he gave us to know. Even if we do not always act morally upright, our behavior is still along the lines of what the world is, and along the lines that God laid out.

People who believe the world is as it is often lead a normal human common sense life. This view leads us to relax and to do what we can when we can. It allows us to appreciate the world without forcing too much change.

Selfish people proclaim "this world is as it is" as a cover for their selfishness. Instead of "just act human", they say "the world is a tough place, and you have to be tougher to get what you want", "self-interest is how the world works, so you must promote yourself without regret", and "you let down your guard, and I will do what serves me". So, most of us are cautious when we hear somebody proclaim this view. Our caution is justified, but that does not mean we have to look at the world askance, not as it is.

Ironically, for us to appreciate that the world is as it is, sometimes the world has to be otherwise, at least for a while. We only really appreciate that the world is as it is if we come to appreciate that the world is as it is from some other view. That change does not mean the world was not as it is as has now become as it is. The world did not change radically. The change means we had wrong ideas before, and now have better ideas. We "wake up" from mistakes about the world as mechanism, that our ideas of a table are illusions, morality is unreal, only power is real, the spirits control our destinies, etc.

The ability to wake up from one vision of the world to another is part of the world as it is. If we have the ability to wake up, then we also are susceptible to making mistakes about how the world is, and we are susceptible to people who use our ability to wake up to fool us. They offer us false views of the world so as to control us and-or control themselves. This potential for being fooled also is part of the world as it is.

Visions of the world other than it is can be quite tempting, often more satisfying than the world as it is. We need to make visions of the world other than it is to have all kinds of art but maybe mostly to tell stories. There is nothing wrong with going away from this world for a while, feeling better, and maybe learning while we visit other worlds in our imaginations. I love fairy stories, "escapist" fiction, sword-and-sorcery, and science fiction.

Some visions of the world other than it is are not good and some are bad. That is how bad people come to control us. There is no point in cataloging bad visions here. Often it is not the vision itself but the uses to which it is put that are bad. A fairy story can be a bad thing if it is used to terrify children beyond the

intrinsic scariness of the story – fairy stories are scary. A real story of seeking justice in an unjust world can whip up prejudicial frenzy.

How do we know the world we see is the world as it really is? Paranoid people believe their delusions. Ideologues of all kind believe their dogmas. There is no good answer, especially because, if we are to grow as human beings, we will come to see the world in somewhat different ways several times in our lives. We evolved a pretty good sense of how the world is, of what are good visions and bad visions. We should rely on that to begin with. We also evolved abilities to test visions to see if they are false or bad. People who live a long time in fairy land or paranoid land often do badly, and we should trust our sense of what does badly and well. We can benefit from the advice of other people. I have always found my ability to judge visions of the world improved if I let my imagination roam a bit and so developed a sense of what is real and what is imagination.

Your Favorite Spirit.

Nobody relates to all the spirits equally. Just as we have favorite places where we go to get refreshed, and which we take care of if we can, people tend to have favorite spirits with whom they forge a relation of mutual support and care, such as the saints, scientists, artists, and politicians described above. People can have more than one favorite spirit, although it is hard to have too many. In some societies, the spirit is of a place such as a waterfall or mountain; in others it can be a tree or an important crop; and in others it can be an important or interesting animal.

Comparative Power of the Spirits.

People vary in their opinions of which are the powerful spirits and the spirits with the broadest scope. It seems natural, for example, that a sky spirit (Zeus) would have a wide scope and be powerful. But a water spirit or the spirit of travel (Poseidon) also would have a wide scope and be powerful. People like to align themselves with spirits that are powerful and have a wide scope but it is not necessary to align yourself with the most powerful spirit as long as you have a good relation with your particular spirit, and you give each other what you need.

Originally, among foragers, spirits probably did not much variation in power and scope, the differences were not consistent between people and groups, and the differences did not matter much. Questions of power and scope became more important as people settled into other ways of make a living such as herding animals, horticulture, and agriculture, and as people developed more complicated societies to go along with other ways of making a living.

When modern people hear that spirits differ in power and scope, they naturally ask which is the most powerful spirit and-or the spirit with the widest scope. This question does not have to have an answer, and in many societies did not. What difference does it make if that spirit is more powerful than this spirit, or if there is a most powerful spirit, as long as my spirit and I get along well? It also does not matter if the scope and powers of spirits overlap. What if both snake and badger have some power over the ground and the water that runs through the ground? As long as people who like snake get along with snake, and people who like badger get along with badger, there is no point in disputing who is the most powerful controller of the ground and its water.

Ordered Spirits in State Societies.

Chiefdoms and state societies developed with the rise of intense horticulture and with agriculture. State societies are about six thousand years old. Some agricultural state societies developed into industrial societies. Nearly all people alive now have grown up in a state society, including nearly all the readers of this book.

People tend to see the spirit world as ordered and ranked when their own social lives are ordered and ranked. It is not the case that the ordering and ranking are direct mirror images of each other, or that one simply causes the other; but the two do go along together.

Chiefdoms and state societies have to have a single order of power, with a clear small group of rulers at the top. In these societies, it does make sense to ask which spirit is most powerful and has the widest scope. The rulers associate with the top spirit.

Because most modern people live in state societies, and are the social descendants of people who lived in state societies for millennia, we also tend to think in well-ordered hierarchical terms, and so we want to know which spirit is the most powerful and has the widest scope.

The highest “spirit” in a state society usually is not one single spirit (god) but is a small group of spirits, often connected, often a family. The original “God” in Israeli thought was a small collection of gods (“Elohim”). The development of one god out of the original small circle of high gods is unusual, and happened only in Egypt, Israel, China, and perhaps in some versions of Hinduism in India. It also happened in a philosophical form in ancient Greece, but this version was never a general religion, and so does not count.

Other spirits do not disappear in state societies. Many of them stay on with various powers and scopes. It is tempting to think of the other spirits as like the bureaucratic officers in a state – this idea is developed in ancient China – but that need not be the case, and it is too much to deal with the variations.

The order of spirits within a state society depends not only on relations within a given state but also on its relations with its neighbors, in particular other states. For example, if states are at war, they might see their high gods as warring also, and might be particularly concerned with which gods have the greatest power and scope. If the states are friendly, they might see kinship connections between their gods. Because most early states developed near each other, such as the various states in Mesopotamia, usually it was not too hard to find either of these alternatives in the old lore.

Faced with this new world of spirits, people of various social ranks and powers have to decide what to believe in and what relations to cultivate. I take that topic up again later.

18 Worlds 2

This chapter is the second to describe themes in world views. The first part of this chapter continues from the previous chapter while the second part dwells on an important world view. As with the worlds in the previous chapter, assess the worlds in these ways: Can we think of this world as a teaching game? Can we think of this world otherwise? What does this world teach us? What kind of behavior does this world call for? Does this world call for us to act along the lines of Jesus' message mixed with practicality? Can we graduate (succeed spiritually) in this world? When we graduate, what do we graduate to? If we have to leave this world to graduate, what do we leave this world for? Can we use the lessons of this world to live in this world?

PART 1: Continuation.

Ever-Interesting World.

I find the world continually interesting even if often exasperating. When I was young, there were no small computers. Every decade a scientific change opens new doors and asks new questions. Every hundred years, we get a new scientific revolution. Within the next few decades, we will have a good idea how the world started in the Big Bang and what will happen as the universe gets older. Every fifty years sees a major new artistic movement. Even though the new art says the same old things, the new art says them in different ways that are worth noticing. I cannot see all the movies that I want within my lifetime, let alone read all the novels or watch all the TV. People never tire asking which sports team will be number one this year, and I even like watching golf on TV. One lifetime is not enough to learn about one major form of life such as flowering plants or monkeys. One lifetime is not enough to learn one way of human life, such as being a farmer, programmer, Buddhist, Christian, Thai, or Oregonian. It is fun to know other people and other ways of life. There is no end to getting to know the world and various ways of life. I can imagine an end to it in the future when the world is populated by super smart beings, but I am not worried that I will get bored. Some lucky people seem to find the world an intrinsically fascinating place.

Boring World.

On the other hand, it doesn't matter which college teams wins the national championship in what sport. Maybe this batch of neighbors is temporarily quiet and clean but soon they will move out, only to be replaced by a batch that is loud and dirty. Loud and dirty is more common than clean and quiet. Movie stars look good for a few years but it doesn't last. Plots of new movies are the same as plots of old movies. Even if we understand what happened at the Big Bag, that knowledge won't change the basic character of life on Earth. Most people don't understand science, and most people can't assimilate new art after they are about twenty years old. Politics is the same old game, even if now we have bad democracy where once we had bad royalty. The real rulers in democracies, rich people, govern about as badly as old aristocrats used to do. Once you learn about a few animals or plants, you know about most of them. You can learn the basics of any way of human life, such as being a farmer or Christian, in a few weeks, and then new ways of life are only repetition-with-slight-variation rather than anything really new.

We do not need to “feel all ways of life from the inside” so as to understand all of them well enough. A Christian can learn about Islam, and vice versa, in a few weeks. After you get to know a few other ways of life, then a few more do not make much difference. After a while, deep down, all people and all ways of life are pretty much the same. Yes, you can make a TV show about “nothing” but even that gets boring after a while. It does not take a even a small portion of a single short lifetime to figure out that life is not mostly about anything intrinsically interesting but about fussing so as to produce a batch of new people, children and grandchildren, who go on to do more fussing to do the same thing.

Many ordinary people can be diverted by the never-ending superficial change of the world such as game shows on TV but that does not make the world intrinsically interesting or intrinsically good. That kind of entertainment is for idiots. Any person who might be interesting him-herself will see enough to know that the world is not interesting, and so being interesting defeats itself, and being interesting is more a burden than a reward.

This view is more than cranky pessimism. It is based on a survey of how things seem to be. This view is not necessarily the same as a fallen world, although a fallen world and a boring world could coincide.

The role of boredom behind ideas of the world is so important that I take it up again in another part of this chapter below.

Progress; Continually Better World.

Alternatively, the world is getting better. Three hundred years ago, people lived under aristocracies but now about half the world lives under democracies that work more-or-less. Three hundred years ago, most of the food was grown with animal power, and a farmer could only feed two or three people other than him-herself. Now one farmer feeds as many as a hundred other people, and the other people have time to work in science and art. In some places, for some times, the world does stink. But on the whole that is not true. If you are not in one of the bad places, try to see outside yourself.

Progress is an Illusion.

John Lennon “It’s getting so much better all the time”.

Every time we learn how to grow more food, people have more babies, and, in the end, everybody ends up about the same as they always were. The average level of life in the United States has not gotten better in the decades since 1970s, it has gotten worse. Even if, in some way, people are materially better off, they are not better off intellectually, artistically, or spiritually. People are just as ignorant, dull, stupid, and selfish as they ever were. To gain our little temporary bits of material well being, we have poisoned the world, drastically changed the climate, destroyed biodiversity, and turned vast areas of the world into a desert. People are not freer in general; they just think they are because the media says so. The mass of people do not decide elections and govern their own country now any more than they did four hundred years ago but we have to go through the pretense that they do.

A hundred years from now, when people are gestated in bottles and machines regulate most of the world, then we will see more clearly that we are not better off.

The World Could Have Been Better but We “Blew It”.

This is my basic position, and I will not go through it again. This world, and, I think, most evolved worlds, are not intrinsically good or bad, or progressive or stagnant. It depends on what the dominant evolved intellectual-aesthetic-moral life form makes of them. We did not make the best of our world. We did not make it good enough in general. It still might be good enough, and interesting enough, for some groups of people, some individuals, and whatever results from the future interaction of humans and machines.

Good or Bad for Me.

“I cannot decide if, on the whole, the world is interesting or boring, getting better or worse, and is a good place or a bad place. I cannot decide if the world worthwhile or not. All I can do is evaluate it for me and my immediate circle.”

In this case, the relevant question might be whether or not the world is an adventure, and whether it is adventure enough.

The Same Might be Good.

In some ways the world gets better, and in some ways it gets worse. In some ways it is interesting but even what is interesting now gets boring later. When the world is boring now, interesting things do seem to turn up, but then they get boring in their turn. I can't tell if, on the whole, to an objective observer, the world really is interesting or boring, good or bad. It seems as if, on the whole, the world might be about the same but that the world is different in different times and places. If so, that is good enough for me as long as I can get to the places that are interesting and getting better. A world that is not overall better off worse but that has a lot of variety in it is about the same as a world that is overall interesting and overall a good place.

In this case, the relevant question might be the same as above: Is the world an adventure? Is the world adventure enough?

Supra-Rational: Too Much to Understand Intellectually.

The world can be too hard to understand in two ways. First, it can be too hard to understand because it is too hard for humans to understand, that is, too hard for one particular evolved intellect to understand. If humans were smarter, the world might be easier to understand and evaluate.

If the world is too hard for humans to understand now, we cannot assess it as ultimately interesting or boring, good or bad, getting better or getting worse. All we can do is assess it according to our limited perspective. Maybe as humans evolve, our descendants will be able to better assess the world.

Second, the world might be too hard for any intellect to understand, as we know intellect. It might not be comprehensible to any finite intellect or to any infinite intellect. Another evolved intellect might see the world better than humans do but it still could not completely understand the world. The world might not

be that way. This outcome does not mean the world was not created by a mind. This outcome means the mind is not merely intellectual. It is not clear what it means to be a mind that is more than intellectual, but it is not necessary that all minds be basically intellectual.

If the world does not make sense intellectually, then we can't assess it unless we use non-intellectual criteria. People do not agree on non-intellectual criteria, so we cannot assess the world. Not even Romanticism can correctly assess the world by non-intellectual criteria, although it fools people into thinking it can. This problem of a greater-than-intellectual world cannot be cured by evolution unless we evolve in a way that transcends intellect, and, in addition, that particular way allows us to assess the world correctly.

In either case, all we can do is deal with what we can make sense of.

Most major civilizations and their religions, especially Western civilization and Christianity, have assumed that we can understand the world well enough intellectually to assess it properly. That idea is basic to Classical Greek philosophy. That is how Christianity helped science to arise. Even when mysticism and "supra-rationalism" play a part in civilizations, as they do in Hinduism and Taoism, there is a very strong rationalist strain, and there is an assumption that mere humans can "get" the world well enough to assess it properly and to orient toward it properly.

Many Worlds without End.

Some people think this world is infinitely fascinating but even they don't begin to understand how deep the fascination goes. Some people think this world is boring but they are wrong because they have no idea of the playfulness of the many worlds. Whether the world is ultimately rational or supra-rational is irrelevant. There are many worlds without end. This universe has hundreds of billions of galaxies, with hundreds of millions of stars in each galaxy, and trillions of elementary particles in each star. Besides this universe, there are more worlds (universes) than there are elementary particles in all of this universe. Each world is a significant interesting variation. The brightness of sunlight if you were standing an arm-length from the sun would be a tiny candle compared to the brightness of the many worlds. What makes sense here in this world does not make sense there in that world, and what makes sense there does not make sense here. It makes no sense at all to ask about the sense of it all. It makes no sense to ask if it is good or bad, or feels good or bad. It makes sense only to participate and to someday to get a glimpse of the many worlds as they cascade out beyond your limited glimpse.

Even if this is true, it misses the point. Good and bad do matter, in this world and in all worlds. What matters is what we do right here right now in this world or right there right then in any other world.

God is One, Whole, Undivided, Perfect, Complete, and Self-Sufficient.

As far as I know, all major religions and philosophies eventually come to the conclusion that God (Tao, Heaven, Dharma, the Spirit) is one, whole, undivided, perfect, complete, and self-sufficient even if they see the nature, personality, operation, or essence of God differently. I do not explain how they come to this conclusion because that is not important. The implications are important.

Why is there something instead of nothing? Why is the something imperfect or incomplete? As most children quickly figure out when they hear this idea of a complete God, if God is self-sufficient, they why did he make the world and people? If he needed us for some reason, then he is not self-sufficient etc. If he did not need us, and we are a lot of trouble, then why did he make us? If he is complete and perfect by himself, then how did he make us? If he is complete and perfect, and we are not one with him, we must be incomplete and imperfect, and therefore we must be the source of trouble.

The various answers to these questions define world views but I do not go through a list of possibilities. Some answers are given in the sections below.

A modern form of this dilemma replaces God with various things that are bigger than people but are still in the world: society, culture, the state, nature, the ecosystem, etc. The founder of modern sociology and anthropology, Emile Durkheim, in France, in the late 1800s, famously said that society is God. He meant that people get their ideas of God from the power of society over individuals and nature. Society seems to have power over nature because society dictates how people interact with nature. The modern political form of this idea is some kind of totalitarianism: socialism, fascism, Communism, theocracy, American Republican Mercantilism, all-inclusive PC communalism, and all-good nature. The collective counts; and people are understood only in terms of the collective. We come from the collective, and will return to the collective. Our problems begin where we diverge from the collective. We can solve our problems by merging back into the collective.

In the modern case, the origin of humans is not the same kind of issue. Nobody needs to ask why society makes people at all. We need to ask why society makes the kind of people that it does. Then the same questions follow in the same form.

Religion and social science only make progress when they get away from these questions. We can get away from them by dwelling on them until we make peace with them or we can get away from them by ignoring them until we feel comfortable getting back to them.

Emanation and Descent.

The idea of emanation does not strictly require the idea of a perfect, complete, self-sufficient God, and does not strictly require the idea of descent, but the three ideas usually go together, and it is easier to work with them together, so that is how I use them here.

God made the world by extruding (“emanating”) something from himself even if he just emanated himself from himself. The world is an emanation from God. The world emanated from God as a tree emanates from a seed, fruit emanates from a tree, a work of art emanates from an artist, a baby emanates from a woman, a car race emanates from a group of guys fooling around with engines, the wind emanates from air moving, etc. Usually there is no complete and strictly logical explanation of emanation, so the idea of emanation remains on the level of an image. But most people get the image well enough, and it makes enough sense to be satisfying.

Because God is perfect, whole, and complete, then nothing else can be perfect etc. If anything else were perfect etc., it would be God, and there is only one God, so anything else that is not God cannot also be

perfect. It might be very good but it cannot be perfect. At least in relation to God, anything else has to be less than perfect. I do not explain all the ways in which things can be imperfect but three of the most important are that things other-than-God are not as good as God, not as real, and not as self-sufficient (in Buddhist terms, they suffer from dependent origination). Because the universe and all the created worlds are not God, they too are imperfect. Everything descends in perfection-goodness-realness-sufficiency as it emanates from God. It is like a pyramid. God is at the apex. Everything else emanates from God and descends as it emanates. Everything else is less than God. Something might seem perfect, good, real, whole, seamless, self-sufficient, etc. to us but it would not seem so in comparison to God. Society, culture, the state, nature, our particular religion, capitalism, etc. might seem that way to us but would not seem so in comparison to God.

The universe could be binary: God and everything not-God. That seems too simplistic. It seems more in accord with what we see that the universe exists in several levels of perfection, realness, goodness, unity, self-sufficiency, etc. There are at least three levels: (1) God, (2) below God but still mostly, and (3) this material world. In most versions of this idea, there are at least seven: God, great sub-God (like Jesus) who really does most of the creating, sub-sub-God (like archangels), spiritual (like other angels), humans, this natural world, and below this world. Most versions also divide this natural world into beautiful natural stuff and "ugly icky" natural stuff, and include demons, to make at least nine levels. The highest levels are spiritual, ideal, light, good, full, and enduring while the lower levels are material, confusing, dark, bad, empty, and transient. Sometimes the world is made of two halves (see "Dualism" below), reflected around humans in the middle.

God likely did not emanate all the universe with all the levels all at once. More likely, God emanated the first subordinate level (creator sub-God), and then the first level emanated a second level and most of the other levels. Sometimes one level can emanate another level, as when good beautiful nature evolved human beings. The creator sub-God level might be amazing but it is not God, so it could not emanate anything that is absolutely perfect. It could not even emanate anything as perfect as itself. With each emanation, things got less perfect, less spiritual, more material, and more screwed up. Not only did the world and other worlds emanate, they also descended.

By the time we get far away from God to this human world, we are pretty well mired in becoming rather than being, illusion, confusion, materiality, and loss of self. This world is not the worst world imaginable. This world still echoes the beautiful worlds above. It is still possible to ascend from this world. But this world is bad enough to be a danger to humans.

This view of the world explains many things, in particular the nature of composite beings such as humans, the existence of spiritual beings of much power, the existence of conflict, and the existence of evil.

In modern versions, society-culture, or nature, emanates the world, and each emanation is less perfect the farther away it is from society-culture or nature. For example, capitalism is a perfect system. The corporation is one of the creations of capitalism. The corporation is not in itself perfect but the system of interacting corporations is led to be more perfect. Society-culture makes rules. The rules make people into farmers, warriors, priests, scholars, rulers, craftspeople, artists, etc. None of those are perfect but they play a role in a system that is more perfect than any of them alone could be. We can say similar

things about the justice system, the university, the football program, the corporation and the people that work for the corporation, etc.

Demi-Urge. This section describes an important variant in the myth of emanations. Because God is perfect and complete, he does not directly create the world. God creates a slightly lesser god who does make the world. This creator god is less than God but still tremendously important, creative, and powerful. In Classical world views and philosophy, this creator god was called the “demi-urge”. Aristotle gives the first clear account of the situation. Because this creator god is not quite God, the world that he creates is not quite perfect, but quite close.

To account for the subsequent falling of the rest of the world, sometimes the creator god “goes bad”, like the Devil in Christian mythology. The creator god can “go bad” through pride, jealousy, vanity, or just because it chooses badness rather than evil.

Sometimes to account for the mixture of good and evil in this world, and for the strife in the world, God does not create only one creator god but two, the gods of light and darkness. They are supposed to create a unified lesser world, the world of angels and of human experience, (also “the unity of the two sides of the Force”) but instead they quarrel, botch the creation of lesser worlds, and create both light parts and dark parts that don’t mix well. Sometimes the whole thing gets resolved in the end, while sometimes not.

God creating the world has always been a problem in Christianity. You can see John the Evangelist trying hard to wrestle with the problem in his gospel. The New Testament makes clear that God created the world through Jesus (as “the Word”). That idea seems to suggest that Jesus is the lesser demi-urge, and that is how Gnosticism (see elsewhere) understood the situation. The gospel of John suggests that Jesus is less than God but official Christian doctrine insists that Jesus is fully God. In the Christian view, God is both God and the creator demi-urge semi-God. If Jesus is fully God, then it is not clear why Jesus created the world or how, or how evil comes into the picture. If God created the world through Jesus, then Jesus made Satan too, and that idea makes Christians nervous. Christians want to have their cake of Jesus as full God and eat their cake of Jesus as the demi-urge at the same time. This conflict is one root of the idea of the Trinity, and why the idea of the Trinity is so confusing and hard to understand.

To account for badness, the New Testament invokes an extremely powerful Satan. In that case, it appears as if Satan is the demi-urge, also took part in creating the world, and might be about equal to Jesus. Satan and Jesus might be the two co-equal demi-urges. Jesus and Satan might be twins. But official Christian doctrine insists Satan is not equal to Jesus, did not create, and is not the brother of Jesus. So Satan becomes an archangel at one level below Jesus. Satan becomes the false unnatural creator while Jesus is the genuine natural creator. Roughly equivalent to Satan in level but not in evil are the other archangels, in particular perhaps Michael. The other archangels are not at all creators but only instruments of the creativity of God and Jesus. Unlike Satan, they are willing to accept their lower status as mere instruments and do not try to be more than they are.

The idea that Jesus (or someone like him) is the higher truer real natural creator while Satan (or someone like him) is the lower false unreal (empty) unnatural creator arises repeatedly in Western civilization and probably is much older than Jesus. You can see a version in Romanticism and you can see a version of

genuine versus poser in Existentialism. In modern nature worship, nature is the true good creator demi-urge while people and civilization are the bad lesser creator demi-urge.

Ascending.

God foresaw that the world would not be as he is. He foresaw that each level would get worse, and that a lot of pain would result. He foresaw that sentient-moral-aesthetic beings would arise who would come to think of him and yearn for him, and who would suffer from being trapped on lower levels. He would make sure we had a way back to him. The way back is ascendance. Ascendance is salvation.

Once a being achieves sentience, it can use sentience to work its way back through the levels to unite with God again. People can overcome their contradictions, connections with vices, bad ideas, and bad causes, their material needs, etc. to become better citizens and better people. Then they can become more religious. Then they can become more saintly. Then they can become more ascetic and given to intellectual pursuits such as philosophy, mathematics, and meditation. From there, they can ascend to levels that I am not competent to describe.

All religions, including Christianity, have versions of ascending although they might not call it that and they might insist that it be put in the context of other religious ideals such as grace and being judged by God on Judgment Day. The idea of ascending easily combines with the idea of devotion. In the Classical Mediterranean world, the leading philosophy of ascending was neo-Platonism, and its leading teacher was Plotinus. I do not describe it here. It greatly influenced Christianity. It also influenced the idea of progress on the scale of society.

People still have an idea of getting better, and still have an idea of getting better in stages. Not all of this can be considered a version of Ascending. When a Scout works through his-her levels and merit badges, we can't see it as exactly the same as neo-Platonic ascending. When a business person climbs the rungs to reach CEO, it is not the same, although the business person might feel as if it is even better. It is not always clear how much ideas of getting better conform to the religious ideal of Ascending.

Of course, people can descend as well. That idea is known well enough already.

Dualism Again.

Levels, powers, qualities, abilities, personalities, judgments, etc. quickly become confusing. Is the abstract world of mathematics really higher, better, and realer than the world of human love? Instead, it is easier, and certainly it is true in part, to order the world along lines of obvious contrast and conflict. Take the various possibilities, and arrange them in two lists with each item in one list opposed to an item in the other list. It is easier to divide the world in to good and evil, light and dark, high and low, man and woman, woman and man, spirit and material, material and spirit, natural and artificial, smart and stupid, genuine and false, naïve and cunning, real and illusion, being and becoming, right and powerful, striving and comfortable, weak and powerful, poor and wealthy, common and aristocratic, city and country, us and them, etc. Now that you have arranged your two lists, pick a side. Different societies-cultures-religions places have arranged the lists differently – in some societies the aristocrats are good while the

country pagan people are bad. Most societies-cultures-religions eventually simplify things down to a pair of such lists even when their leaders and wise people know better and say so.

Which features are on what list tells a lot about a society-culture-religion, and sometimes it is useful to look at the lists to assess a religion.

One particular arrangement of lists has been common and influential for the last four thousand years, and still shapes how we see the world today: Good versus Evil, Light versus Dark, Spirit versus Material, Soul versus Body, True Order versus Artificial Order, State Order versus Chaos, Angels versus Devils, Saints versus Sinners, and Us versus Them. This is the world view of many groups today that are based on ethnic, gender, politics, economics, nation, and religion.

We probably couldn't get through the day without some dualistic simplifications: breakfast cereal that I like versus breakfast cereal that I don't like; my car versus my wife's car. There is a real difference between right and wrong.

Even so, assessing any situation entirely in terms of dualisms usually causes a lot of harm. The world really is not divided up neatly into "us versus them". American politics since the late 1960s has been a bloodbath of "us versus them". This simplistic war has eroded the country, eroded freedom, and eroded the standard of living for all Americans.

Most great religious leaders have used dualisms but warned against dwelling in them. When Jesus said "Go and sin no more" he recognized the distinction between sin and not-sin. But he also let sinners go if they would reform.

Despite the wisdom and caution of most religious leaders, the most important and powerful form of dualism, listed above, was clearly stated by one important religious leader, Mani, about 400 years before Jesus. Mani might have been born in Iraq but he lived most of his life in Persia (Iran) and he probably picked up his version of dualism there. In his lifetime, he was a religious star, and had many followers. He explained how the world originated from one God, but was hijacked by a Devil. A follower could find God again through Mani's teachings. Eventually the followers of good and light would have a final battle with the followers of bad and darkness. The followers of Mani are called "Manicheans", and the term has also come to mean anybody who believes in simple pervasive dualism with good and evil at the core. "Manichean Dualism" means an ideology with pervasive dualism and with good and evil at the core. The terms usually are meant disparagingly. Manichaeism influenced nearly all the religions of the Middle East for hundreds of years, and formal Manichaeism even got as far as China. Manichaeism was a powerful force shaping Christianity, and also a powerful force against which wise Christian leaders fought. Saint Augustine was a Manichean before he was a Christian; his Manichean beliefs shaped his Christian theology; and his Manichaeian Christian theology strongly shaped Christianity from his day on to the present. His reading of Paul is almost purely Manichean. I find this sad.

Gnosticism.

Except perhaps for a few mystics, most people are not born knowing about God, Emanation, Descent, Ascent, Dualism, various spiritual beings, various spiritual powers, etc. Even in Star Wars, the Jedi and

Sith are not born knowing about the Force but have to be trained. They have to be trained properly to get most use of the Force and not to be dangerous. We need knowledge. Knowledge is potentially powerful and sometimes can set us free.

The word "Gnosticism" comes from Greek, and comes from the same root as the English "know" and "knowledge". Literally, it means "know-icism" or "know-ism". The literal meaning has changed to become the title of a system of belief, so now the term is capitalized and it means "doctrine of (secret powerful) knowledge about how the world really is rather than what it appears to average people" or "religion based on (secret powerful) knowledge about how the world really is rather than what it appears to average people".

In theory, Gnosticism could refer to any knowledge about how the world really is, especially to knowledge that is not common, such as that the world is really a happy place or the world really is a boring place. In practice, Gnosticism always refers to knowledge about how God made the world, Emanation, Descent, Levels of the world, spiritual and material beings, Ascent, and Dualism. Compared to that knowledge, other kinds of knowledge are not very important or useful.

This kind of deep knowledge is not the same as simply knowing about things such as how to bake a cake or how to figure the area of a rectangle. This kind of knowledge has the intrinsic ability to give power and to set you free. If you know how God made the world etc, then life changes. Even if you do not ascend to high levels immediately, automatically you ascend a bit, and are more in control of your life because of your ascent. Even just knowing there is this kind of knowledge sets you on the path to further ascent. The knowledge is as much a life-changing skill as mere information. Learning to program a computer, learning law, or learning about medicine is not just assimilating facts but learning a skill that changes your life. Gnosis is the highest example of such knowledge as skill.

With skills that change your life, there is a body of facts but there is also transformation and initiation. Gnosticism had formal schools in the Classical world. Gnosticism as a formal school had ceremonies and life-changing rituals. Gnosticism has a feeling of being "in the know" as opposed to being a member of the ignorant herd, and, as with all groups that feel they are "in the know", has the secret rituals to go along.

The same ideas live on in the modern world, mostly as the suspicion that the world is not as it seems, we are at a disadvantage for not knowing how the world really is, some other people know how the world really is, they are at an advantage, and we would like to share their advantage by becoming one of the privileged people who know how the world really is. This attitude is the basis for cults but it is also the basis for many world religions. Christianity, Buddhism, some kinds of Hinduism, and some kinds of Taoism, started out with this attitude.

The same ideas are often expressed in cinema and TV, and often make for great stories. The movie trilogy "The Matrix" is essentially a Gnostic tale in which the hero ascends levels until he finally knows how both the human and machine worlds work, and is able to merge them so as to defeat the Devil. The scene in which Neo chooses the red pill or the blue pill is a key Gnostic ritual. Not all Gnostic stories are this good in quality or this good for us.

An implication of Gnosticism is that we need saving, Gnostic knowledge can save us, and knowledge alone can save. Nothing else can save us. Other spiritual qualities such as decency, following the Golden Rule, mercy, perseverance, etc. certainly are not bad but they are not key and they are not enough. Another implication is that those people who are not saved are damned, those people who are not “in the know” are damned, and the damned are the automatic enemies of the saved. It is easy to see how bad people might be the enemies of people who are “in the know” but it is also true that merely good people and merely decent people are enemies as well because they tempt us away from the path of true and saving knowledge.

God Intervenes in World History.

The material in this chapter is in addition to the question of divine intervention from earlier chapters. I skip any discussion of complexity, and growing complexity, in evolution.

In the simple form of this idea about world history, world history has a direction, and individual people would be well advised to go along with the direction of the world. About two hundred years ago, most commerce in the world began switching over to capitalism. Now, a business person had better think like a capitalist. About a hundred years ago, government began to switch over to representative democracy. Now most people need to think how to get along in large representative democracies. As long as we can identify the trend, we don't need to bring God into the business.

Yet people do want to bring God into the business. People like to think God foresaw the major trends and approves of them. People like to think God foresaw Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism, benevolent royalty in its time, traditional farming in its time, democracy, and capitalism. People like to think God nudges along the trends if they are not going fast enough or in the right way, sometimes by sending along a champion like Arthur to teach good government and Constantine to establish Christianity, and sometimes a prophet like the Buddha to preach the Dharma. If people can recognize the major trends in world history that God promotes, they want to go along with those trends. This view feeds Romanticism.

I believe God foresaw most of world history, and approves of some of it such as democracy. I don't think God intervenes much to help out.

Each major civilization-and-religion has its own version of God-and-world-history but the most relevant for the Western world is the idea that came from Judaism. I explain that version in a later chapter. We need to know it not only because it is at the heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam but because it has been so often abused, even to the detriment of the Jews.

Culmination of World History.

World history might have trends without necessarily having a culmination or a focal end point. Farming succeeded hunting-and-gathering. Aristocratic monarchy succeeded tribes and chiefdoms. Industrialism and capitalism succeeded farming. Democracy succeeded monarchy. Something else will succeed both capitalism and representative democracy. Something else will probably succeed biological humans as we know them now. I don't know where it will all end. It might not even end in five billion years when the Sun swells up and eats the Earth.

The idea that world history might not culminate, or that it might not culminate as wished, makes uneasy the people who see God as promoting a trend and who actively promote the trend themselves. If you are a capitalist, and you think God promotes capitalism, then you want capitalism to be the culmination of world history and the ultimate formal expression of God's will here on Earth. The same is true of every major religion. If your particular way of life is not the culmination of world history and of God's will, then you are not the receiver of the greatest possible grace of God.

Jews wished to see world history as culminating in them even though Israel fell and even though other ethnic groups seemed to find favor with God. Christians first, and Muslims later, inherited the idea from Jews. Christians still wish to see world history and the will of God as culminating in Jesus and the Church even though they know that superficial historical events have gone on long afterward. The idea of a Day of Judgment allows major religions, including Christianity and Islam, to remain the culmination of God's will and world history despite historical changes and new trends.

Even Romanticism was based on culmination even though Romanticism seemingly championed the ever-unfolding of the Spirit in new ways. The only reason that we could know about the previous unfolding of the Spirit was because finally the Spirit had revealed itself to a few great thinkers such as G.W.F. Hegel. If the Spirit reveals itself to particular great thinkers, that fact means the culmination of the self-revelation of the Spirit is close at hand, and the great thinkers are the highest expression of the will of God. Marx and Communism inherited this view of themselves and world history.

Even though I think God prefers some movements in history more than others, such as democracy in its time over aristocratic tyranny, I don't think there is an inevitable direction in world history, world history culminates in any particular movement or people, or that any particular institutions are the embodiment of God's will on Earth during the time of culmination.

It is easy, and mutually reinforcing, to combine Emanation, Descent, Levels, Beings, Peoples, Ascent, Dualism, and Culmination. The large modern nations do it in their visions of themselves. I leave it to the reader's imagination.

Order, Chaos, Emptiness, Naturalness, and Genuine Creativity.

The section is mostly about order and chaos. Emptiness gets a few words below. This section is needed because, in the last 200 years, first the West, and now the world, developed a guiding myth chaos and creativity. Romanticism easily hijacks the myth into error.

In the Middle East and Egypt at least 4000 years ago, people told myths of chaos versus order. People wanted order. They needed order imposed by somebody, including the state. People were trying to live by gardening on the shores of rivers and swamps, and feared the chaos that came of both floods and droughts. They wanted somebody who could tame the waters so that the waters came regularly in the right amounts. In the Middle East, they personified chaos as a dragon-like beast. The Israelites adopted the myth to their situation. In the Tanakh, they called the beast of chaos "Tiamat". God defeated the beast of chaos and imposed order on the world. As representatives of God, the priests and aristocrats of the state defeated the chaos of desert, floods, wars, and social injustice to give regularity and life. Chaos

was not always bad or evil, and it was not always opposed to order, but it was not order, it could undo order, and it was not subject to the control of ordinary people. It has to be tamed.

About the same time that capitalism became strong, about 250 years ago in the middle 1700s, the West, especially England, developed a different myth of chaos and order. Order is the enemy; especially the order imposed by the state is the enemy. State order is supposed to be for the benefit of all people but really it is for the benefit of the aristocrats. Inevitably state order leads to oppression and death. It is artificial order and artificial creation. In contrast, true natural creative order arises spontaneously out of seeming chaos, out of the action, interaction, exchange, creativity, mixing, bubbling, and creativity of the mass of common people. The apparent chaos of common people is not really chaos but is a kind of natural creative force that leads to natural organization. The rigid mindset of artificially ordered oppressors cannot understand, accept, or live with this natural creative chaotic force that leads to a better higher order. Natural chaos is really good. The imposed artificial order of the state does not really bring order but actually brings chaos to the minds and hearts of people and of nature. The imposed artificial order of the state is really the bad chaos that the people should fear.

This is the myth behind:

- The modern version of Robin Hood
- Popular movements and populism
- The evil Emperor versus the good Rebels of Star Wars
- Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely
- The Devil as Lord of the material world and of state power
- The fact that oppressive regimes make the trains run on time
- Rock and roll defeats oppression and bad music
- The free market is better than anything the state can devise
- Good new ideas come only from a group of guy-or-gals in their garages
- Mr. Smith Goes to Washington
- Black people in the United States are more creative than White people
- The workers are always right and the bosses are always wrong
- The capitalists are always right and the bureaucrats in Washington are always wrong
- The people are always right and the scientists are wrong when they disagree with the people

This myth is partly true. In a formal scientific version, it does help explain how capitalism and the free market can lead to order and to benefit out of apparent chaos. It helps drive a modern mathematical movement called “complexity theory”. This myth puts some force into modern democratic movements. It helps overthrow tyrants such as in Libya and Syria.

This myth also serves as the medium by which rich people and officials of the state can lie so as to have their cake and eat it too. Rich people and state officials say they are “turning loose the free market, reducing taxes, reducing regulations, etc.” while really they are imposing their own state order through their control of state institutions. All politicians, including Left Wing politicians, falsely claim to be “on the side of the people” so as to serve their own ends.

In fact, both chaos and state order can be both good and bad. Sometimes good new ideas come out of chaos and mixing. Sometimes the ideas cannot be implemented unless the state provides a framework within which people can act safely. Sometimes chaos is just hurtful. Sometimes we need state order to protect us from the lies of rich people, powerful people, demagogues, and even from the intrigues of state officials themselves. We should not romanticize the opposition of chaos and order. We should not let the myth fool us into thinking that the masses are always right while the intellectuals are always wrong. We should not let the myth fool us into thinking the natural dark-skinned races are always right in the long run while the rule-bound light-skinned races are always a wrong dead end – or vice versa. We should not identify our religion with the spontaneous order of nature and God while we think of other religions as an artificial order imposed on natural creativity.

I think great nations have had a powerful impetus to order as well as a powerful among their people to advance. Great nations always have an unsolved conflict between order and chaos. Too much of one is as bad as too much of the other. Just as art needs the resistance of a material, so order needs the resistance of chaos and chaos needs the resistance of order. Order and chaos are the materials out of which the other creates its own works. Just as peoples who seek security at the expense of freedom usually end up with neither, so peoples who seek creativity in chaos at the expense of order usually end up with another kind of dead order and with no creativity at all. To rely on the myth of chaos without also providing some order results, in the long run, in deadness and boredom.

Emptiness Again, and Contrast.

Because the order that arises out of chaos does not seem to arise out of any other order, it seems as if it arises out of emptiness. It seems as if Emptiness is not empty but is full of good potential. This way of thinking is a trap of thinking, a trap of the mind. It would not be much of a problem except it gets mixed up with other ideas of emptiness and creativity. In a bad form, it rationalizes the Devil (Lord of Darkness and Nothingness) but I find that use of the idea so silly that I simply dismiss it.

A positive thing only gets done because of something else that does not get done or gets left out. In two classic examples of this idea, a bucket is only useful because of the emptiness in the middle, and a wheel only is useful because of the hole in the through which the axle goes and around which the wheel turns. Every note in a melody is also an instance of a lot of other notes not played. Even a chord is only three or four notes out of a dozen possible notes. An airplane is useful for what it leaves behind as it is going to somewhere else. Emptiness and positive-ness go together to get things done.

That is fine as far as it goes but we have to be careful not to make too much of it, to romanticize it. The bucket would not be useful without the emptiness in the center but it would also not be useful without the walls to surround the water. The wheel is not useful without the rim that contacts the ground. The note that sounds is the note that sounds, it is not the absence of all the notes that do not sound. Sometimes we leave a place just by leaving it but even that is a positive escape. Usually we leave a place to get to another positive place.

Emptiness might allow space for some creativity but it is not creativity itself. What a potter takes away from a lump of clay allows the figure to emerge but the figure is not simply the absence of clay. Just because we don't always see where creativity comes from does not mean it comes from emptiness.

Emptiness is just emptiness, it is not another positive force in disguise. We like to think in terms of positive forces just as we like to personify the wind and the rain. When we see something come up, and we can't explain exactly where it comes from, it is consistent with our language and our imagination to say it came from emptiness; but that is only a way of thinking that we ought not to get trapped by.

Another way of thinking with emptiness is by thinking with contrasts instead of with positive assertions. Any note in a musical scale is only a note because of how it contrasts with other notes. Any color is not just a color but is a color also because of how it contrasts with other colors. As a matter of fact, our eyes see shapes not merely as positive things but in contrast to other shapes and to their backgrounds. When we see black, white, or shades of gray, we seem them not as stand-alone images but only in contrast to other specks of black, white, or shades of gray. When we see a person, we see it in contrast to trees and to other similar shapes such as dogs and street signs.

We need contrast but, as with emptiness, we should not let that need fool us into thinking that contrast is somehow a positive thing in itself that is more important than other positive things. We understand an elephant by knowing it is not a pig, deer, or tiger, but that does not mean we have completely understood the elephant when we know it is not a pig, deer, or tiger. If we know each of them only by contrasting it with the others then we don't know much at all. This is a mistake that philosophers and social scientists made in the decades after 1960. This mistake feeds moral relativity and other kinds of relativity.

Good and Evil as Substances.

In the movie "Barbarella", the town to which her spaceship falls was built over a lake filled with a dark seething liquid, which turned out to be the evil of the world. This evil sets the character for the residents of the town and sets the tone for life there. To gain freedom, Barbarella had to come to grips with the evil flowing underneath. In an episode of Star Trek TNG, an advanced race decided to leave all their evil behind and to cast out into the heavens as a new reborn race purified of evil. They collected all their evil into a sentient powerful black sludge, capable of self-action, which they left behind as a large pond on their old planet. The evil black sludge being is lonely and has a bad temper. Unfortunately, the crew of the Enterprise run into the evil black sludge being, and it does bad things to them. On a better note, we think of goodness as "water of the heart" or as "honey of the heart". We think of kind words as "sugar", and think of affection as "sugar".

Just as we personify the wind and the fire so also, in reverse, we think of abstractions as substances. We think of justice as like a person or like a steel hammer. In scary movies, evil can be transmitted like the "cooties" of childhood games. This way of thinking is not necessarily bad, and can be useful in thinking through a situation. If we need to think about implementing justice, it might help to think of it as a hammer that must be wielded properly. This way of thinking can cause problems when we can't get out of our image. Sometimes we need to let go of the old image to adopt a better image. Sometimes we need to get away from images for a while and to think in other ways. Unfortunately, people tend to get stuck in their images, and become vulnerable to bad ideas.

Dream World.

The idea that this world is a dream is common enough so no specific example is needed. The idea itself is not very important, less important than a hidden message (“subtext”) conveyed along with the idea. The hidden message really is what the idea of “world as dream” is usually all about; the idea of world as dream is usually only the carrier for the hidden message. The hidden message is that this world is more real and consistent than a fantasy but less real and important than we usually take it. How real and how important the world is depends on specific versions of the myth of the world as dream. When we think of this world as not really real and not most important, then we are free to take a different attitude toward this world. For some people, this means freedom from silly social convention so that they can be a better person. For other people, this means freedom for self-indulgence.

I think this world is not as real and important as the mind of God but it is still real and important. It is the only world we have, it has rules, we have to live in it, and we have to try to be good decent people while we do live in it. We have to try to make it better. We are stuck in it, and might as well make the best of it. We do not make the best of it by obsessing on wealth, power, idealized families, religious ideology, fame, success, or any particular aspect. If thinking of the world as dream helps us get over bad obsessions, then the idea serves a good purpose. We have to avoid allowing the myth to lead us to self-indulgence. It is fun to make the world more dreamy and less dreamy in our imaginations, and to see how that feels. Sooner or later we have to settle on a range of dreaminess that is compatible with our best principles, and to live there.

PART 2: Losing and Finding Forever.

The ideas here show up again in later chapters on Buddhism and Hinduism.

The Ugly Reality of Boredom.

People have children who have children who have children who have children and so on with no obvious point. People crave stories. People want to see their lives as stories. Not to see your own life as a story is to get caught in horrible boredom. Boredom is as much of a driving force as hunger, fear, lust, power, and keeping ahead of the Joneses, and boredom probably has been a big driving force through much of our evolution since we developed enough imagination to succeed. Boredom drives the other forces except for hunger and sometimes fear. The ideas of the world as a game, the world as a dream, and that we live many lives are responses to boredom.

The idea that the world is boring is not the same as that the world is pointless although the two ideas do affect each other. You can be bored with a meaningful world and you can be amused by a meaningless pointless absurd world. This section is about boredom rather than meaning although it is helpful to use lack of meaning to get across the feeling of boredom.

First, you live an ordinary human life for a very long time. Think of three kinds of normal human lives. As an original forager 50,000 years ago, your whole life was gathering, hunting, having children, and dealing with the neighbors. You do this for 1000 years. People about 10,000 years ago also tended gardens. Imagine you tend a garden, find a mate, have children, and fuss with neighbors for 1000 years. Modern people go to work, find a mate, raise children, fuss with neighbors, watch movies, and watch TV. Imagine doing that for the next 1000 years. At first, the love affairs, children, baseball games, family dinners,

overdue bills, squabbles, brushes with the law, pregnancies, intoxications, etc. would be fun. We were adapted to enjoy this kind of life. Yet if you live a long time, this life must become boring. The modern version would be excruciating. Sometimes comedy skits make a joke of this by torturing spies by making them watch bad movies or bad TV rather than “water boarding” them. Ordinary life is not worthwhile. It is not evil, and it can be good sometimes, but it is not worthwhile. Eventually, you cannot find a new song to listen to, and “the next big thing” looks like every other previous “next big thing”. Eventually you would beg for release; likely well before 1000 years was over. If you lived long enough, it would be easy to see that life is boring.

Second, you live for a very long time in a world of swords, sorcery, and kingdoms rising and falling, like the TV show “Game of Thrones”. Likely you would enjoy this version of life longer than middle class TV land but even this life would not escape boredom forever. Even if you were king, queen, or the most adept wizard in the world, eventually it would be not fun, and it would be boring.

Third, scientific and philosophical problems go on for a long time. It seems, for every scientific problem we solve, several new ones arise. If a person could get deeply interested in science, he-she might work on scientific problems almost forever without getting bored. Life might seem worthwhile. Yet it is not true that scientific problems last forever. Science is only 400 years old. In that time, scientists have solved many problems such as that the Earth goes around the Sun and life evolved. Even problems that remain theoretically open, such as gravity, have practical solutions, Newton’s equations and Einstein’s equations, that let us do what we need. Someday in the not-so-distant future, we will solve even difficult problems such as merging quantum mechanics and Relativity. Philosophical problems might not have definitive theoretical solutions but we will come up with practical solutions that help society carry. We will be able to make smart computers. Ten thousand years from now, even intellectual life might not be fascinating. Life might not seem deeply interesting even to a nerd.

Fourth, maybe the human life we see is not the realest human life. Imagine that real immortal people of the future, bored and desperate, have set up a simulation in which the short-lived ugly people that we see around us are only game characters for the real people. You are only an avatar for some other long-lived beautiful person living somewhere else. By living a short while as a character, pretend-dying, and then pretend-being-reborn, the real immortal people operating the simulation can fight boredom for a long time. But not forever, not even for them. Someday they will become bored with every simulation. Even if they do not become bored with every simulation, eventually they must realize that even simulations are not worthwhile. Simulations are not anything qualitatively different, they are just variations on the same old themes. Even when particular simulations break the rules of physics, eventually all simulations become just variations on the same old themes. Life is not fascinating even in fantasy land.

Fifth, maybe we can make the simulation interesting if we make it the right kind. Scientific, intellectual, philosophical, and social problems might all be solved but moral problems keep arising. Even if a moral problem is not new, it has to be addressed every time it appears in slightly different clothes. Almost by definition, we care about moral problems, so we have to engage. When we engage, we are not bored, and life seems worthwhile. Create the kind of simulation that appeals to moralists and to do-gooders like me. Create a world where moral issues keep coming up. Maybe that is what this world is. As long as there have been people, we have had moral issues, and they seem to be the same moral issues. Maybe we already live in a game where moral problems have kept us engaged for at least a million years. We

hardly ever get tired of them. We always get excited about which politician is right and wrong. We always get excited when a dirty old pervert subverts an innocent young life. Yet even this can get old. After a while, we stop caring even about morality. After a while, we say, "To hell with it. Let the politicians and power mongers figure it out. Let that ethnic group take care of its own troubles. Let that gender group take care of its own troubles. Let the Liberals whore themselves out. Let Conservatives stop lying and balance the budget, or they can do down with the rest of us." Even moral life wears out. Even if good and evil depend on each other and are locked in a never-ending game, moral life wears out.

Sixth, suppose one or more of these scenarios, separately or together, succeed. Every time a superior person gets bored, he-she pretend-dies and pretend-gets-reborn over and over. The previous boredom is forgotten, and a new life begins. In this way, a person can stave off boredom indefinitely. Then life seems worthwhile. This solution is offered by Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism. Please keep in mind all these scenarios, in particular this last scenario, for the chapters on them. Even this solution does not avoid boredom. The perpetual life of satisfying illusion is not a solution.

Dealing with Boredom.

Faced with deep boredom, the idea of death makes more sense. Maybe death is not a bane but a boon. Maybe death makes sure life is short enough to be interesting. A short interesting life seems much better than a never-ending dull boring life. Even a short interesting life that ends in old age and moderate pain seems much better. When we face the end, we wish it would go on for a while longer, but do we really want it to go on for 10,000 more years, especially if we are old and in pain?

We can improve on the idea of death to make it make even more sense. We can be reborn with most of our memory wiped out. Instead of truly dying, and instead of being faced with deep boredom, we face deep forgetfulness. If we are reborn to a sequence of short lives, we need never be bored. Each life faces fairly new situations with fairly new problems. As long as we can forget between each life, we could go on like this forever. A sequence of short lives is better than an infinite one life. We never really die, we just go away for a while to get ready to come back.

There is another way to deal with boredom. Risk is fun as long as it does not kill us prematurely or make us unhappy with life such as by crippling us or trapping us in a bad marriage. People don't want real risk. We want pretend risk, risk that feels real as long as we are caught up in it but in which we can't really die, or get crippled. Suppose the immortal people of the future create an electronic simulation. Life in their game is much like life now, with all its fun risks. A character in the simulation is like a real living person now, and faces death in the game. An immortal person of the future can take on the persona (avatar or character) in the game. All risk is real within the game but is not real to the person outside the game who voluntarily entered the game. To make the game right, the immortal person of the future gets lost is his-her game character. While playing the game, the immortal person of the future forgets that he-she is anyone but the character in the game. The game is like the movies "Total Recall" or "The Matrix" but fun and benevolent. For a while, risk is real, life is worthwhile, and life is not boring. When he-she dies, he-she remembers. But nobody really dies. Death is not really real. After a fake death, of course, boredom sets in again, and the immortal person of the future goes back to the game. Besides getting out of the game for a while by dying, he-she also can get out of the game if, while in the game, he-she remembers that he-she is only playing a game, and that the game life is not the realest life. In that case, a person

does not disappear from the game right way, but only waits to die the natural death of the game life. In effect, this is the same as living many short real lives on this Earth. The characters in the game could not tell the difference between living short “real” lives in the game versus living short real lives on this Earth in which we die and are reborn. It could be one of the major goals of the game to remember while still in the game, and the real immortal people who manage to recall while still in character would earn extra prestige. Maybe this game already happened, so that we, and all the people around us, are real in this game but are not real for the immortal people of the future.

God Loses Himself to have more Fun.

Maybe God gets bored too. In that case, this world, all worlds that have ever been, and all possible worlds, is how God deals with boredom. God deals with his boredom by losing himself to put himself into the world. God falls asleep (loses himself) to dream the world (create the world).

In a classic episode of the revived version of the TV show “The Outer Limits”, Ron Glass plays the Devil. The Devil is trying to gather the soul of a man, I think a schoolteacher. The Devil will give up if the man can give the Devil a task that the Devil cannot do. The Devil can do anything. The Devil can make or destroy anything, even whole galaxies. The Devil knows where everything in the universe is, can zoom to retrieve it, and can get back in no time at all. The Devil can go to any time past or present. To the Devil, there is no lost item or lost moment of time. The Devil can espouse and refute any philosophy. At first the man is worried. Then, in a stroke of inspiration, he tells the Devil to “get lost”, that is, to lose himself. This the Devil cannot do. The Devil cannot negate himself, especially the Devil cannot negate himself in fantasy. The Devil is an all-competent unlimited intellect; but only an intellect. The Devil has the limited creativity of a formula, of a machine. The Devil does not have the true creativity of God. God could lose himself. This story is a modern version of true creativity versus false creativity. This is a modern version of the Devil as the Lord of this world of matter, energy, and power. This is an embodied version of the Liar’s Paradox, of Godel’s Paradox.

In this view of the world, God can only overcome boredom by losing himself. A lost God has more fun than a self-aware found God, at least temporarily for a very long time. For God to lose himself is the same as for us to die and be reborn over and over. What is around us is one instance of what happens when God loses himself, when God dreams or plays. As long as we believe this world is the realest world, and the only real world, and we stay committed to this world, then God continues to sleep and to dream and to have fun. We are also the way in which God sometimes wakes up and finds himself again. We are the way in which God recalls that he is God. Each time a particular person understands that this world is God asleep dreaming, God partially wakes up. Luckily for God, at any given time, few people feel this, so mostly God keeps sleeping and dreaming through people being deeply involved in this world of his dreams. When everybody has awakened, then God will be fully awake. When that happens, God likely will lose himself again, and it will start all over again, perhaps in a world with different physical laws and a different feel to reality.

The idea that the world results from God falling asleep and dreaming, or from losing himself, shows up in Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, and in other European-and-American stories. In Mahayana Buddhism, God is Buddha Mind or Emptiness while the Devil is the ordinary mind or the material floating world. In

Hinduism, God is Brahman the true Creator (although he creates a dream world) while the Devil is Maya (who is not evil but merely seduces us into accepting as fully real this dream world of illusion).

The idea was a theme in the work of the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick, whose work was the basis for the great movie "Blade Runner" and the good movie "Total Recall". In "Total Recall" the hero, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, at first an agent of the Martian ruling corporation, has his memory wiped so he can better infiltrate rebels against the corporation. However, in losing his memory, he also changes his character. I don't give away any more of the plot. If you look, you can see hints that the movie is not reality at all but a fantasy, intended or otherwise, even though, in one scene, the movie specifically repudiates that interpretation. In the science fiction movie "The Pusher", starring Dakota Fanning, the small band of heroes, who have mental powers, faces an evil government agency who wishes to control such people, and faces a family of evil people with mental powers. The bad guys can read the minds of the good guys, and so always can foil their plans. The heroes can only defeat their enemies by blocking their own plans from themselves, that is, by falling partially asleep.

Combo Pack.

It is easy and fun to combine the individual version and the God version. Rather than have the immortal person of the future take a role in a simulation, think of all possible created worlds as simulations that God sets up, and let God take all the roles in any simulation. God is each and every person in every simulation. For God to forget himself is for God to take a role in the simulation. Each of us is God, and God is each of us. For any person to remember that he-she is in a simulation is for God to remember that he lost a bit of himself in the simulation, but not necessarily for God to recall that the whole thing is a simulation, and so to wake up completely. God simply chuckles that this one person awoke, waits for this one bit of himself to die, and, in the meantime, carries on forgetting as all the other characters in all the rest of the world. The whole business keeps going on as a lot of fun for God. Any given life might not be a lot of fun but many lives are fun, and the whole thing is a joy even if no one life is fun. If ever everybody wakes up all at the same time, God might wake up entirely too. That possibility is quite remote. If it does happen, God just loses himself in another simulation.

Super Combo Pack.

It is easy and fun to combine many of the visions in this chapter, and the combinations don't even have to be consistent.

For example, God loses himself, and, in so doing, emanates the first world. That first world is made up of Jesus and the Devil, who, together, make up the demiurge. Jesus and the Devil have an argument. Their argument pervades their world and all the worlds that they make as a result. We are on one of the made worlds. Our world is thus not the realest world but is more like a simulation. We can wake up to realer worlds, or we can wake up to the ultimate reality of God before God lost himself. It is easier to wake up to realer worlds, and to ascend those one-by-one until we reach the world of Jesus and the Devil, where good and evil need each other, and where their interaction creates a never-ending sequence of worlds. We can live in that world and have a lot of fun.

I invite you to watch movies, read comic books, listen to politicians, listen to various kinds of pop music, watch TV dramas, watch TV pseudo-news shows such as on CNN, and use your imagination to pick out the Dualism. It is harder to pick out the Emanation and the Descent but usually not too hard; just think of the Devil as in the second or third level from God, and the present world as a couple of levels below that. The great hero of your religion usually is in the level just below God. I invite you to make up your own combinations.

Some form of combined Emanation, Descent, Levels, Ascent, Gnosticism, and Dualism is part of most major religions, including Christianity. It is also part of most major political stances even when they deny the validity of religion, including Marxism and some kinds of Political Correctness. Some combined form is part of modern militant atheism and even part of Darwinism when it is put in the service of ideologies such as militant atheism. As far as I can tell, the Church of Scientology is an almost-textbook example of such a combination.

I think this mindset can be a serious impediment to getting along properly when it is used to get people to do what we want.

Widespread Similar Morality.

The world as a dream, God lost, simulation, or game, are all versions of the same kind of verging away from this world. All versions come from people with good imaginations. To the extent the versions are fun and make this world more interesting, I find nothing wrong with them. If they get us to act badly, then they are wrong.

The implied questions in all these alternative worlds are: What lies behind them? What does it mean when we figure out that this world is not quite as real as it seems? Who is dreaming, running the game, and losing himself? Does it make a difference who is dreaming, running the simulation, or losing himself? How do we find out who that is, and what difference it makes? Just knowing that the world is a dream, a simulation, or God-lost- in-himself does not necessarily tell us who it is or much about who it is and what he wants. Does figuring out that the world is a dream etc. automatically set us free? If it does set us free, free to do what? If it does set us free, free from what? In the realer world behind this world, what are the rules? What are people there supposed to do? Is the morality there like the morality here? Are we supposed to do what they are supposed to do? I can't answer any of this for sure. I can only deal with this world as it comes along. I assume that is what the maker of this world wanted, for us to deal with this world as well as we can, however the maker made the world.

At least in our world, the key question seems to be morality. What matters is how you act, and how you act toward the world. Suppose this is a simulation, or suppose this is God forgetting himself, and you figure that out. Then what? Does that release you from morality? Does that release you from acting according to Jesus' message, from working hard to make a better world? I think it does not. In fact, if you can be sure God made the simulation, it seems to make acting well even more urgent.

Assume the laws of physics can change within different simulations. Even if people made the simulation, and it was not a creation of God, the makers could adopt different laws of physics for use within the game as long as the laws were consistent. Modern games in our world hardly follow the laws of physics or the

laws of evolution, and they have to be fairly consistent. Even if were not as it is on this world, but physics would support sentient-moral-aesthetic game players, would the laws of morality change much, and could the laws of morality change much? I think not. I think it is harder to change the laws of morality than to change the laws of physics and the laws of evolution. The modern philosophical way to say this is that the morality that we know here on our world "would hold in all possible worlds". I can imagine variations on moral-like feelings that might hold up for a while under some particular evolutionary conditions but I cannot imagine well-developed morality for fully sentient-moral-aesthetic beings other than as described in this book, even under somewhat different physical laws and different evolutionary histories. I hope I am correct, and that the Golden Rule, "applies equally to everybody", and the other points of Jesus' message would be valid in all evolutionary histories and all simulations. In that case, the key question in all worlds would be how sentient-moral-aesthetic beings act. I am not sure if that issue is enough to make all simulation worlds interesting but it is an interesting idea itself.

19 Common Mass Religion

This chapter begins a series of chapters that describe religions. This material is not what you find in a text or popular book. These chapters assess the main points in the stances from my viewpoint. What does any stance offer? What do I have to look out for? How do believers act? These chapters do not point out hypocrisy. If you have read this far, you can see hypocrisy for yourself.

All the stances were formed in nation-states although they all have older roots. All the stances are lived now in states in a world that is mostly capitalist. I do not take account of cultural, national, or class differences. I do not separate states that try to be pluralistic and democratic, such as England, from states that do not, such as China and Indonesia. I do not assess according to a school called “the marketplace of religions” although I have sympathy with that school.

People all over the world have different official religions such as Christianity or Hinduism, but, if we look only a bit below the surface, we find that the huge majority of people in states hold the same religion-and-morality regardless of official religions. This chapter is about that common mass religion. Just because common mass religion is widespread does not mean that thinking, intelligent, educated people don't share it, that or it is the religion only of superstitious dolts. The very large majority of intelligent educated people share it, and often are its most vocal proponents.

Mass common religion has two main components. The first component is popular religion regardless of the official religion. Some of popular religion is due to human nature as it plays out in states while some of it is due to particular cultures, societies, economies, histories, etc. I cannot separate the factors that shape popular religion. Do not take my portrait to popular religion as a picture of religion in all societies in all places at all times; take it only as my view of popular religion in states.

The second component of mass common religion is called “state religion”: beliefs and practices that are like religion and have to do with the state, such as Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, and New Year's Eve in the United States. State religion often takes motifs from official religion, as, for example, Christmas is part of the state religion of the United States (and elsewhere) and Christmas takes motifs from Christianity.

Official religion does influence mass popular religion and state religion but not nearly as much as priests, politicians, and parents think. Mass popular religion is different in Italy from Indonesia but not nearly as much as Christians and Muslims think. State religion is different in the United States and China but not nearly as much as Christians and old-line Marxists-Maoists think. This chapter does not gauge relations and relative strengths of official religion, mass popular religion, and state religion.

If most people share the same de facto real religion, then why do people argue over religion? They argue for the same reasons that ethnic groups argue even when they live in the same place and are citizens of the same state, the same reasons that people from the American South and West argue although they speak the same language and supposedly share values, and why America has been fighting a “culture

war" since the 1920s, bitterly since the 1960s. People come already-in-groups, and feel forced to argue because of their groups. Some disputes are about pure religion but few. Few people fight over child baptism or which saint is most powerful. Most disputes are really about wealth, power, dominance, sex, success, and security; disputes use religion as a vehicle. People look back to their official religions for a source of points to use in arguments.

Disclaimer.

The values that I promote are not the property of Judaism or Christianity even though, for me, Jesus was the origin, and even though the values arose first in Europe from the fusion of Jewish and Western ideas. They are not the property of England, America, or European democracies even though they grew best in Western Europe. They are not the property of democracies even though they seem to go along with democracy. Any culture, society, ethnic group, religion, socio-economic class, gender, age, occupation, or nation can learn these values. Try to see the points, consider how adopting them requires a shift in your beliefs, and avoid most of the mistakes described in earlier chapters.

If you do not already share these values and want to adopt them, then you have to change regardless of your official religion. If you are a Christian but don't share these values, then you have to change. I don't know how compatible these values are with mass popular religion and state religion. I think most people can live these values and still carry on with the saints and some gods, but I am not sure. When saints become so important that they crowd out working hard to make the world better then you do not follow these values. These values are not compatible with staunch militarism, mercantilism (greed), or placing our state above all other groups. They are not compatible with doctrinaire Marxist atheism. They are not compatible with oppression and tyranny. They are compatible with national defense, modest nationalism, and fighting for a free world.

I don't think these values require drastic change if you already are basically a good decent person. You could learn most of these values and remain a Jew or a Muslim because you don't need to accept Jesus as God to accept these values. You might have to change some Hindu, Buddhist, or Taoist ideas but not much. These values already appear in all religions although religions other than Western-European-and-American Christianity emphasize ideas other than these values.

It is hard to change values and views. We stick with what we learned as children. God does not require us to be perfect right away. The rest of this book can help you decide what to keep and what to let go. If you find worth in the values in this book, then see how they fit with your stances, and how the spirit of your religion could survive along with them. Consider that you really might have to change a bit what you believe.

If your culture does not stress these values, then your culture has to change, or you might have to leave the mainstream version of your culture for another version. Most cultures recognize these values but not all stress them. I do not give lists here. The idea that a culture might have to change to become better is completely against current dogma in social sciences and PC dogma. There is no way around this. Most people believe it but won't say it. This too was a hard lesson that I had to learn while growing up but one that is better accepted. Don't confuse ethnic pride with a good set of values. Don't think that adopting a variant of your culture that allies you with a powerful group is the same as changing your culture and

adopting a better set of values. You have not adopted a good set of values just because you discover your “Blackness” or you join the White Supremacists.

Brief Warning.

I have a good sense of the spirit of systems. I have no head at all for the details of systems, including rituals, holidays, clothing, bodily decoration, titles, ranks, hierarchy, etc. Once I use the details to see the sense of a system, I forget the details. I recover the details from the spirit of the system only when I am again in particular situations. I find wearing particular kinds of clothes, symbols, decorations, etc. to be confusing and often silly. I cannot remember the official differences between Protestant sects no matter how many times I have learned them and how hard I try. In Thailand, I understood both Buddhism and vigorous animism right away, but I had to keep relearning the holidays each year and the details of the holidays. As part of Western American culture in my youth, I learned disdain for formality, rank, and pretence. I cannot lose my disdain no matter how important formality and rank are to other people. My disdain helps me forget the details of systems, including rank and pretence. I hope my ability to see the spirit of a system makes up for my inability to deal with details and my annoyance at rank and pretence. Please keep my limitations in mind.

I need to be clear. I find much of common mass popular religion silly and annoying. I wish people would stop all that damn stupid silliness. Mass common religion pushes out better ideas and so makes people inept by default. Still, the large majority of people can be good most of the time despite mass popular religion. Most people become bad about religion only when they mix mass popular religion with doctrinal rigidity from official religion or official ideology. I hope my limited empathy and sympathy still leave room for me to be fair enough.

PART 1: COMMON MORALITY AND MORAL RELATIONS

Most groups recognize universal moral principles such as “do unto others as you want them to do unto you” and “applies equally to everyone” but those principles are not applied consistently and are not vital in daily life.

Instead, people have a set of morals that they apply within their “in-group” of reference at the moment, a set for relations between known groups, a set for people-in-general who are in the same state but are not necessarily in any group we can identify, another set for strangers and strange groups who probably are not in our overall state system right now, and another set for enemies. All these sets are related but that is not an issue in this book.

People might belong to several in-groups: family, job, profession, church, sport, “service” group such as Scouts, ethnic group, etc. The moral rules that people use within each group differ slightly so that you behave differently toward your family than on your job, but the rules do not differ drastically. Simply, the ideals almost apply within the in-group, with allowances for different roles such as “parent and child”, “worker and co-worker”, or “worker and boss”. We try to treat people as we want to be treated, and we expect them to do the same. We consider the general welfare, and we are willing to contain our own needs a bit for the general welfare. People do not generalize this kind of moral behavior outside the immediate in-group, and, in fact, keep the best version for their families.

Relations between groups do not have to be bad. In fact, contrary to modern misconception, relations between groups often are good as long as groups know their mutual relations, stick to it most of the time, do not change without proper notice, and do not change quickly in ways that would be seen as immoral betrayal by the other group. I am not saying relations are always fair, only that relations work best when steady. Relations between groups get nasty when groups think other groups are changing relations without proper consultation, think other groups are cheating, or think the relations are so unfair that they undermine the ability to raise any family.

Relations between groups tend to be tit-for-tat, equal exchange, or what anthropologists call “balanced reciprocity”. If groups have about equal power, when members of a group interact, they both get about the same benefit even if they don’t get the same things. When an Italian baker exchanges with a Greek wine maker, both get about the same value. When groups do not have similar power, some imbalances are built into relations, such as Black people in the American South often did work for important White people without pay or for less pay than White workers would have gotten. Black people hoped to get some protection in return.

Once we get past groups with which we have regular relations, relations tend to deteriorate the further away the other groups are. There is no point going into many details.

The Tanakh (Old Testament) knew of these situations and made provisions for them. It forbade Israelites from treating strangers badly as long as strangers behaved well and did not knowingly break the laws of Israel. That does not mean Israelites actually treated strangers better than Romans treated strangers but it least they had the ideal. It was this kind of ideal that Jesus generalized. The Tanakh also allowed that Israelites could treat non-Israelites worse, in some ways, than they treated Israelites. Israelites could not charge interest on loans to other Israelites but could charge interest to non-Israelites. Israelite law gave priests privileges that non-priests did not have such as a share of taxes, a share of sacrifices, and sexual access to girl and women war captives. Israelite law, supposedly from God, allowed Israelites to treat war enemies terribly, murdering the men and raping the women – which was a common practice in most war by most ethnic and religious groups.

Later Muslim law followed Israelite law on many points, especially taxation. Non-Muslims were taxed more heavily than Muslims. This provision probably accounted for more conversions to Islam than any forced conversions or “conversions at the point of a sword”.

The order within groups and between groups was not just a practical relation, it was a moral relation and a result of God’s will. The attitudes of Israelites and Muslims show that people believed the rules were moral and came from God even when they were unfair by our standards and by the idea of “applies equally”. God rewards people who keep to the rules and punishes groups when people in the groups that break the rules even when the rules are unfair. Judaism and Muslim are more theistic than most religions but that only makes the ideas clearer, it does not change the basic ideas. If you do not believe in God, you can substitute “Dharma”, “Heaven”, or “Tao” for “God” and nothing changes.

The identity of groups, and relations between groups, usually are based on a division of economic and political resources-and-roles. A breach of these normal relations is a breach of the moral rules, and of

God's will. For example, ruling families rule while subjects obey. Warriors carry out the orders of the rulers while merchants move goods. In India, this social order was clearly religious but China, Europe, and the Middle East thought the order was moral-religious even if it was not spelled out in a religious text. Merchants with their own armies make rulers and soldiers uneasy. Rulers and soldiers complain not about the power imbalance but about the moral breach. In Thai society, when Chinese first began to immigrate to Thailand in the middle 1700s, Thais farmed or governed while Chinese ran commerce. All over the world, in one city or large urban neighborhood, only one ethnic group can be the dominant gangsters. After World War 1, Jews in America moved into professions such as law and medicine. Since about 1980, immigrants to America from India and Pakistan have done the same. After World War 2, Blacks in America moved into semi-skilled and skilled jobs in building and manufacturing although often at a level just below Whites at the same factory or job site.

Relations between occupations-and-ethnic-groups reinforce the mix of economics, power, and morality. Since about 1980, Blacks have looked at Asians and Hispanics as competitors who break the rules of ethnic group relations, and Blacks have grown more hostile toward them. They see Asians and Hispanics as taking traditional (since World War 2) Black jobs, and see this as a breach of moral relations. Because shifts in economics and power are common in the modern international world economy, conflicts between religious-ethnic-gender-and-power groups are constant, varying only in their intensity.

PART 2: COMMON RELIGION

The common religion is a variation on animism (a lively world) under state societies.

-There is a single high God (Dharma, Heaven, or Tao) who originated everything and who could control everything if he-she wished. The single high God created beings of various types, including many who are more spiritual and powerful than we are.

-The single high God has relinquished some control to the lesser spiritual beings and to us here as well. They have power and free will. We have some free will. Some of the lesser beings have effective control over some spheres of this world, and are like the high gods of small arenas.

-Lesser gods include not only gods with personalities but also gods that embody spiritual principles and ideals, such as the god democracy, the god justice, the god freedom, etc. Although we might think of these ideas as abstract principles, in fact they are more like personalities, and we can relate to them as personalities.

-Sometimes this world is quite fair (just) and pleasant, but sometimes it is not. We seek the situations in which it is fair and pleasant.

-The single high God is too distant and odd for us to appeal directly to him-her. Instead, we appeal to the lesser spiritual powers for help. We try to forge a relation with them.

-The single high God had a wife (husband) and a family. The wife and children have good friends among the spirits. We appeal to the family of the high God if we can. We appeal to Jesus and Mary rather than to Yahweh.

-If we can't appeal to the family, we appeal to friends of the divine family or appeal to the most important of the lesser gods.

-We appeal especially for help for our family. Our family is a good upstanding family. It is like the family of the high god and the high gods. We have family values, and we know that the good gods have family values as well.

-After help for our family, we appeal for help for our church, business, friends, ethnic group, city, and nation.

-Wealth, health, good marriages, success, and power help our family, so an appeal for them is justified.

-Worldly success, especially family success, is a sign of good relations with the gods and saints. Failure is a sign that something is wrong.

-We give what we can to the gods and to appropriate places for giving (in-groups, church, and state) in the hope that we get what we need and what we ask for.

-The religion has specialists, like priests, monks, magicians, and witches. They can explain how the gods work, what they want, what they can give, and what we can do. We pay the specialists for their services, either directly or through contributions to their organization.

-If the gods or the church abandoned us, we would be in terrible shape.

-We know of abstract moral principles, and we know that they should prevail among our groups and among various groups. We try to follow them when we can but we cannot always follow them and we don't worry too much when we don't.

-We attend the festivals and rituals. We expect other people to do so too.

-We all make mistakes. Fortunately, the high god has made provisions for atoning for our mistakes. That is part of what rituals are for. That is what the other gods help us with.

-Sometimes adept people become close to the family of the high god, or to the lesser gods. They are "saints". Some of them become like the lesser gods, or like a member of the family of god.

-Now saints include states-people such as Thomas Jefferson and Ronald Reagan, scientists such as Isaac Newton and Charles Darwin, business leaders such as Henry Ford and Bill Gates, sports figures such as Knut Rockne and Joe Namath, and workers in a cause such as Ralph Nader and Karl Rove. Their ideas, the events of their lives, their achievements, the places they have been, and relics from their lives, all have spiritual power. People can appeal to them and to those things.

-Even great institutions such as Notre Dame University or the Church can take on a personality and become enough like a saint so we can appeal to it.

-Dead people become close to the gods and especially to the family of the high god. Good dead people become closest but any dead people can become close. Maybe bad dead people cannot become close to the gods but that is not for us to decide. Dead people are like the saints, and so we can include them with the saints. Dead people have spiritual power.

-We can appeal to the saints, perhaps more than to the lesser gods, even after the saints die, especially because they were once like us. Our dead family members are likely to help us in particular.

-We forge a relation with saints, especially dead family members, as a way to get their help.

-Various members of the holy family, lesser gods, and saints all have particular interests, abilities, likes, and dislike. They have particular skills or lack of skills. They have personalities. We have to take that into account when we forge a relation with them.

-Different people appeal to different members of the holy family, different lesser gods, or saints, according to the personalities of the applier, the group to which the applier belongs, and the personalities of the gods and saints. People have different "patron" gods and-or saints. Particular groups, such as families, towns, and occupational groups, have different gods and-or saints.

-Sometimes the different patrons of various people and groups do not overlap much. One family appeals to the son of the high god while another family appeals to a woman saint. That does not matter too much because we know there is some common ground. The priests explain this to us.

-Power can reside in places, things, objects, situations, events, and processes. Often a particular god or saint is associated with one of these, as, for example, the god of a waterfall or the saint of a church.

-We can appeal to the power that resides in one of these.

-Priests (or other religious adepts) can recognize the power of an object, can bring out the power of an object, or can instill power in an object. Objects that were associated with gods, saints, or other power can take on their own power. They become amulets. We can borrow this power when we need for such needs as healing and the attainment of success. Even the strictest Protestant Christians treat some things like this.

-Some people can abuse spiritual power. We fear those people and avoid them.

-Sometimes, in a dire emergency, we can appeal to the abusers of spiritual power. There is always a price, familial, material, or spiritual.

-One god keeps track of our deeds and misdeeds. It is like a tax ledger for spiritual merit and demerit. We are rewarded or punished according to our deeds and misdeeds. Sometimes we are rewarded or punished in this life. More often we are judged after we die.

- The highest reward is heaven, the lowest is hell. It is not clear if everybody will go to one place or the other, but we all strive for heaven.
- Spiritual merit is like spiritual power. It can help.
- We can transfer from our account of spiritual merit to another account of spiritual merit. If we think we have any merit surplus, we can transfer our surplus merit to help another person heal or to help a cause succeed. We can give our merit to our aged mother, sick child, or important social-political cause.
- We might be able to go into spiritual merit debt for a while so we can get something now for which we do not have enough merit now. If a god or saint heals our sick child now, we can promise to do something for that god or saint in the future such as tend his-her shrine or work for democracy.
- We can bargain with the gods and saints.
- The gods and saints warn us personally when we are on the wrong track through signs or moderate punishment. If we think about investing in a particular stock but a similar stock begins to “tank”, that loss might be a sign from our god or saint that we should invest elsewhere.
- The gods and saints warn our group collectively when we are on the wrong track. The gods and saints collectively reward our group when we are on the right track. The gods and saints collectively punish our group when we persist on the wrong track.
- The gods and saints have different plans for individuals and groups, including different nations. We try to discover the plan our god or saint has for us, and to follow it.
- Sometimes the gods want to raise up a particular nation to leadership. The help that nation to get on the right track for leadership, and they punish that nation when it gets on the wrong track. Fortunately for us and our nation, our nation has been selected for great leadership.
- The single high god would not have made the world a mess. The world has problems, so something happened. Probably some god, below the high god but still quite powerful, screwed it up. There are many ways in which this might have happened, including emanation, descent, pride, etc.
- Only people who are deeply concerned with power, who might consider getting power from the bad high god, or who have to protect us, worry about this issue much. For ordinary people, it is best to accept the situation, and then get past it.
- Normal people only have to worry about not getting hurt too much and about not inadvertently falling under the control of this aberrant god.
- There are many ways to live. Some are good, some not so good, and some bad. The gods and saints know which are good and which are bad. The gods and saints have told us which ways are good and which are bad. The good ways are “the right track” while the bad ways are the “wrong track”. The gods and saints let us know when we are living as they intended and when not.

-One way the gods let us know is to send particularly gifted people. These are the prophets, the great religious teachers, the great moral teachers, and the great adepts whose example we can follow even if they did not directly teach. The prophets become like gods, among the saints, even if they deny that they are like gods and like the saints. The Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammad became gods.

-In the long run, what matters is family and friends. If your family succeeds, you are alright with the gods and saints. If your family fails, then all fails.

-There are particular kinds of family that the gods and saints approve of and particular kinds of family that the gods and saints dislike. Of course, we all live in the right kinds of families. The approved family is the most moral family, in fact, probably the only family that is really moral.

-The right kind of family changes with the times. Most people live only in their own times so they are not likely to know that their kind of best family is not the same as the best family of previous times. At one time, the best family might have been a large extended family with several generations and collateral kin all under one roof. Now it might be isolated nuclear families.

-The right kind of family changes with socio-economic-power class. The ruling elites might have one kind of family while urban workers might have another. The fact that they differ does not matter. The gods and saints approve of various kinds of families for different kinds of people.

-Each kind of family has particular best kinds of sex-age roles. These roles are given by the gods and saints. These are moral relations. Any deviation from these roles is punished by the gods and saints.

-Relations between socio-economic-power classes, and between ethnic groups, are given by the gods and saints. These are moral relations. Any deviation from these relations is punished by the gods and saints.

-The church, temple, synagogue, etc. can be important for some people but it is not vital. You can be sufficiently religious without going to a meeting place regularly and even without belonging to a formal religious institution.

-If you do belong to a formal religious institution, and especially if you go to a meeting place regularly, it can make a big difference in your life and in the lives of the people around you. The differences between formal religious organizations, and even between particular meeting places within formal organizations, can make a difference too. I don't go into either topic.

-The nation is an important group.

-Some people seek other paths. Some people want a direct relation with the high god or with a member of the high god's family. Some people want the quiet monkish life. Some people are mystics. That is all fine as long as they do not disrupt the family-centered beliefs of the majority.

-The gods and various spiritual powers can know the future. Religious adepts might know the future, either through their own abilities or by tapping into the knowledge of religious powers. We can learn about the future by hiring religious adepts to tell us.

-Good might, or might not, win in the long run. That is not my concern. I help goodness whenever I can, but I do not take responsibility for goodness.

-I am a good citizen to the best of my ability, and as long as it does not conflict seriously with my own interests. I think the gods and saints would want that.

-The gods, the saints, and the highest god, understand that humans are not perfect. They allow us ways to make up for our faults. An important way we make up for our faults is by participating in the standard religions, such as, for example, by going to church and by giving to the right charities.

-As people get older, naturally they become less concerned with worldly success and more concerned with what will happen after they die. That is when people participate more in formal religions and causes. The gods and the saints understand this and accept it.

The Dying and Rising Savior Mediator God.

One theme in common religion recurs so often, and is so important, that it bears repeating. People want a god that knows the human situation well, is sympathetic to people, wants to help people, and has a lot of power to help people. People want a god they can talk to and relate to, and who can relate to them. People want a god who can assure them that they will be saved to heaven when they are dead even if they have a hard time on Earth and perhaps even if they have a good time on Earth now. People want to feel that the good life will go on forever, and that this god can assure them in particular of participation in the good life forever. The best life they can think of is a good successful family life as it is on Earth, so people want that kind of life forever, and they want a god who can assure them of this.

The best kind of god to do all this is one who has been a human but who is also very closely tied to the highest god. People want a god who has been human but who is also the highest god, the spouse of the highest god, or the child of the highest god.

The worst things in this life are suffering and death. People want a god who has experienced suffering and death first hand but who also has transcended suffering and death, a god who has more power than death and suffering. People want a god who has suffered and died, and then been born again or who has risen from the dead.

It was not hard to imagine this kind of god in traditional agricultural (agrarian) societies because these facts were part of the annual cycle. Every year, the weather-Earth seemed to die and be reborn. The plants seemed to be reborn, die, and be reborn. To live again, a seed first has to die by being put into the ground. The rains bring nutrition and life, but there is a cyclic season to the rains. The mediator human-god was like the Earth, rains, seasons, and plants by dying and being reborn in a context in which he-she was familiar with the details of everyday human life.

The common people both love and fear the aristocracy and the bureaucrats. People both despise the aristocracy and want to be like them. We see the same attitude today toward media stars. People want a god who is both of the common people like themselves and of the aristocracy at the same time. People want a god who is really of the royal lineage but was born and reared among commoners.

It is not hard to see that many gods in many traditional religions satisfy these requirements, such as Isis and Osiris in Egypt, Moses for Israel, Orpheus in ancient Greece, Dionysius-Bacchus in Greece and Rome, Jesus for Christianity, to some extent Heracles, bodhisattvas in Buddhism, and many good and heroes in Hinduism. I cannot here go into details.

I find it easy to understand the popular appeal of this kind of figure and why most people believe in this kind of god, especially if they were born into a strong state religion that focuses on this figure. It has a strong emotional appeal for me. I find it harder to understand why smart people continue to believe in this kind of figure and continue to produce amazing works of theology and philosophy to defend this kind of figure. Whether I fully understand or not, it is so, and I have to accept it.

Unlike some of the other figures, Jesus was a real person. Christians argued that, unlike other figures, Jesus really was both fully God and fully human, really did die and rise again, and other aspects of the story are really true of him as well such as being of the highest lineage but being reared among common people. Christians said versions of this figure in other religions were reflections, imitations, shadows, or fore-shadows of Jesus. Jesus was the only real dying-and-rising-god-man. Some Christians argued that other figures were demons that imitated Jesus in an attempt to undo his good work. C.S. Lewis dwells on this argument in several places in his works. Here I make a point of it only to be clear about it. I disagree with the Christian view. People believe this about Jesus largely because they assimilated the life of a real man to the myths that prevailed in state societies for reasons that had little to do with the mission of the real human Jesus.

My view remains that it does not matter. If Jesus was God, fine. If not, then I think he will forgive me and others for not believing in him as God as long as we do as he taught. The same is true of the other divine figures. Whether they are divine does not matter as long as we do as they taught.

Personal Mediator Gods as Cosmic Principles.

People in all major religions turn major figures of their religion into a cosmic principle. More precisely, they turn major figures of their religion into a person who can become whatever cosmic principle is most useful at the time, and so turn their mediator semi-gods into many cosmic principles. A bodhisattva can become the principle of love, justice, hearing complaints, karma, salvation, unity with everything, etc. as people require. Jesus can become pretty much the same cosmic principles, and has. The human-divine figure mediates through assuming the appropriate personification of the handy principle. Even Jews see their God (Yahweh or El) primarily as a particular cosmic principle of the time such as Justice, Mercy, Vengeance, or Guidance. Even Muslims see Allah this way, and in addition, they see the Koran, and sometimes Mohammad, in the same way, as embodiment of a cosmic principle.

In Christianity, Jesus is both God and handy cosmic principle. I would object less to the idea of Jesus as God if Jesus did not also have to take on the role of various cosmic principles. For the one true God to

take on the role of any cosmic principle is to diminish the one true God, not to extol him. God teaches us principles. God is not a principle himself. Jesus taught us principles. Jesus is not a principle himself. Where Jesus is concerned, confusion over this point started even before the Gospel of John where John declared Jesus to be the Word made Flesh. Even if Jesus was flesh, he was not a cosmic principle, the Word. Even if Jesus taught principles, he was not one himself. Christians who see Jesus as the cosmic principle of Justification, Salvation, Love, or Gratitude make a basic, and common, mistake.

This idea that God is not reducible to a cosmic principle does not mean God is necessarily un-friendly, un-loving, un-just, not-saving, un-good, etc. God can act on the basis of any of those principles and can promulgate those principles. He does so often. This idea simply means that God is not reducible to any of those principles. The exact relation between God and any cosmic principle is like the relation between God and Good. I don't know what it is and I don't speculate here. We don't need to know the exact relation to value God and principles, and to use principles to guide our behavior. (This way of looking at the situation is like getting at God by being clear about what he is not, an approach common in all major religions, and into which I don't go here either.)

This use of a religious figure as a person who can become a cosmic-principle-as-needed is an example of how idea systems eat the world. The major religious figure is the "hole at the center", the "emptiness", around which the color splotches (cosmic principles) flow, and onto which we can project what we need at the time (attach cosmic principles as needed). The fact that this use of a major religious figure fits the pattern of an idea system that eats the world does not make it wrong or right but it does mean we have to be a bit suspicious. I happen to think it is wrong and badly misleading.

PART 3: STATE (CIVIC) RELIGION

The state is a large group composed of other groups. As with all groups, the state uses mass religion, ideology, and ritual. Power and wealth are not shared equally in the state. Groups that have power and wealth use religion, ideology, and ritual to maintain their power and wealth. They also use explicit tools of power and wealth such as the police and the financial system but that is not at issue here. State religion is largely about how the state uses religion, ideology, and ritual to maintain power and maintain relations among groups. State religion is a little bit about how some groups in the state use religion, ideology, and ritual to change power and wealth. For here, subsume "ideology" into "religion" so we need only consider religion and ritual.

It is tempting to reduce religion and ritual to nothing but tools of the state, and this attitude is convenient to use here, but ultimately this attitude is false. Religion and ritual exist apart from the state. The abilities for religion and ritual evolved before the rise of the state. Groups do not create religion and ritual, and groups must work within the logics of religion and ritual. Here, I cannot go into the evolution of religion and ritual and how their natural logic shapes what the state can do, so mostly I go along with the idea that the state has great ability in manipulating them.

The state is not one a harmonious set of groups. Instead of saying "the state uses religion and ritual", it is more accurate to say "groups vie for control of religion and ritual, and each group uses the motifs of religion and ritual to its own advantage". I don't have space here to be that exact. In the beginning of states, states were tied to agriculture, and so controlled the calendar. Since industrialism, states are

somewhat divorced from the calendar. They still retain some of their earlier ties, especially the holidays, such as Easter and Christmas in Christian states. States need cities. Most religions took definitive form in cities as urban movements. Thus “state religion” is sometimes also called “civic religion”. The terms are not important here but you need to remember them in case you read about these issues elsewhere.

-As much as possible, we want the state to be in accord with our personal groups and want our personal groups to be in accord with the state. We want our morality to be the morality of the state. If we are not the dominant group, we will adopt the morality of the state as long as it does not severely contradict our morality. We want our religion to be the religion of the state. If we are not the dominant group, we will adopt the religion of the state as long as it does not severely contradict our religion.

-Formal religion is not as important as the mass religion described above. We don't want the state to contradict the beliefs above. Fortunately, the beliefs given above allow the state huge latitude.

-If our personal groups conflict with other personal groups, we want the state to back us up. We will bend our beliefs a bit to be in accord with the state if it will back us up. A large reason we want accord between the state and our personal groups is so that the state will back us up in our conflicts.

-If we are not in the dominant group, we recognize that we must accept the beliefs of the dominant group a little bit, but, hopefully the contrast is not stark, and we can get along.

-State religions have their saints, usually the great states-people and military heroes, but sometimes also the great religious thinkers and great political thinkers: Socrates, Jesus, Mohammad, the Dukes of China, Marx, Lenin, etc.

-States have regular events to show their cohesion, power, organization, and values. The events are the holidays of the state. State holidays are large rituals.

-Participation in state events shows that your group accepts your relations with the state and that you support the state. Refusal to participate shows that you do not accept your relations with the state and that you do not support the state. If you do not support the state, you are an internal enemy, and so are dangerous. It is hard to be neutral.

-Some groups get a little latitude in participation, especially if they are small and weak. The larger and more powerful a group grows, the more important that its relations with the state be amicable.

-The values demonstrated in the state rituals (holidays) are both the official state values by which people might live but need not necessarily live, and the real underlying values by which people are expected to live. Sometimes the official values are made explicit but rarely are the real underlying values explicit. Still, people get it.

-The state recognizes higher spiritual powers. Even secular states do this, although they are likely to call them principles such as democracy, justice, and nature. What happens in the state has to be in accord with the higher powers. If the state falters, the higher powers try to correct the state. If the state falters

badly enough, the higher powers collectively punish the state. If the state does well, the higher powers reward the state.

-If any group has particularly close links to the higher powers, that group is especially important to the state. If any group offends the higher powers, that group is an enemy of the state and of all the proper groups within the state.

-Our nation is a favorite of the gods, is destined to be an important nation, and someday might be the ruler of the world.

-Our leaders must be in touch with the gods and their values. For this, they probably need to consult with priests and other religious adepts.

-Christmas illustrates most of the points about values and rituals. Christmas originally was not a Christian holiday about the birth of Jesus but a non-Christian holiday that celebrated the victory of light over dark and the return of the light through the lengthening of the day. Christmas now is not primarily about the birth of Jesus but about: First, the "Christmas Spirit" (value) of universal siblinghood; the links between people of all classes, races, etc; and the willingness of people to give. Second, it is about the role of commerce in keeping the nation strong and in allowing people to relate to each other properly without conflict. A prosperous nation is also strong, generous, and peaceful.

-Halloween carries many of the same messages. We vanquish devils with the candy of prosperity.

-The Fourth of July is an explicitly secular holiday in a nation that officially values individual choice, yet, if any group does not participate, that group is highly suspect. Libertarians and Unitarians might be "given a pass" as long as they remain minority "kooky" groups. The values shown during the Fourth of July are not just practical values about how to run a nation, they are moral-religious values about what humans are, what our world is like, and how we ought to live in our world. We have symbols of how a good moral life wins favor for our families from the gods, such as "Mom" and "apple pie". The act of eating the right foods together shows we are all one and share the same values. We have symbols of the transcendent strength of our nation and how we can deal with our enemies, such as fireworks in the sky.

PART 4: CHRISTIANITY AND CIVIL RELIGION

Christianity and civil religion merged in traditional Christian countries. The merger was tight until recently, when the rise of large-scale migration between nations and the rise of the pluralistic secular state made a tight merger harder. It is not yet clear whether modern pluralistic secular states can work. It is not yet clear how closely a state has to be tied to a particular dominant religion to work. Until recently, in China, the link between the state, Confucianism, and commerce was given. With the rise of Communism, the link was strained for a while but now seems to be coming to life again.

When Christianity first arose, it was not part of the civil religion of Rome, refused to participate in some ways, and so suffered moderate persecution. Christians would not sacrifice to the deified rulers of Rome or of particular city states, they would not sacrifice to the gods of the city states, they would not sacrifice to the city state if it were conceived as a god, and they would not eat foods (especially meat) that had

been used in sacrifices. They would not participate in the Roman versions of Christmas, Halloween, the Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Labor Day, New Year's Day, Valentine's Day, and Presidents' Day.

The term "pagan" originally referred to a rural person in the Roman Empire, particularly one who held to the traditional Roman religion(s) and way of life, including the military. Pagans were modest landholders. They thought of themselves as nationalists and true Romans, and as true members of their particular city-state. They thought urban cults were degenerate, especially Christianity. Pagans were traditional religious, social, and nation-state conservatives. Christians were urban religious innovators. Christians deliberately contrasted themselves with rural pagans.

In a reversal, American Christians now are the religious conservatives, think of themselves as upholding the traditional religion of the countryside and nation-state, uphold the nation-state with its religion, support the military, and oppose innovations that come from the "degenerate" urban centers of New York, Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. Christians are the modern pagans. In fact, the rural population in the United States is so small that modern American pagans are not enough to form the same block as did Roman pagans. The real pagans now are wannabe suburbanites who have middle-level jobs, both blue collar and white collar, who support civic holidays, and who are religious at least a little sometimes. The modern real America pagans continue to identify with idealized traditional conservative nationalist country life, as, for example, in doggedly listening to supposed "country and western" music.

The original Christians would have been more like Unitarian-Universalists than like American Christian-pseudo-Pagans. It is not clear how Christians in Rome, would view modern American Christian pseudo-pagans. It is not clear how modern American Christian pseudo-pagans would view Roman anti-pagan urban original Christians if they could meet some real ones.

PART 5: BRIEF ASSESSMENT

We cannot get rid of state religion, common religion, or the mass religion that is their combination, so we might as well get the best versions we can. The best version of mass common religion is guided by the best morality. That is what a good secular pluralistic state aims for. That is what traditional religions can help us achieve.

Mass common religion makes nearly all the mistakes from the chapter on mistakes. I do not point them out. That does not necessarily make mass common religion bad.

Most of the time, there is nothing wrong with mass common religion. Most of the time it lets people get along, lets people know where they stand, lets people negotiate changes, and gives people quite a bit of comfort. I see no reason to complain about that. Mass common religion can be a good thing because it slows down changes and slows down bad movements – political, economic, and religious – that would spread quickly otherwise. Sometimes irrational conservatism is a good thing.

Mass common religion can support bad things such as prejudice and terrorism. That is what good people must guard against. That is what good politicians must stop. That topic is enough for many books in its own right, so I let it go here.

Mass common religion usually only goes bad when there are other conditions to fight about, as, for example, when ethnic groups think that wealth is shared unfairly. In those cases, it is important to correct the underlying problems. That is usually much harder than trying to correct the problems at the symbolic level of mass common religion.

Mass common religion lends itself too easily to abuse by religious movements, in particular demagogues. America now is full of examples but I don't list any for fear of being sued. Examples from the past usually don't carry the "punch" of current examples so I omit them here. It is easy to see Muslim Fundamentalism as this kind of take-over but American Christian Fundamentalism is just as bad. Intelligent thinkers need to devise ways to insulate mass common religion from easy take-over by bad people.

Mass common religion can serve as the vehicle to carry other doctrines. Sometimes it is the only way to carry other doctrines because the other doctrines need to be invested with the religious power that comes from mass common religion. Mass common religion supported Christianity after it merged with religions of the Classical world. Without the pagan spirit, ironically, Christianity might have died. Mass common religion, fused with Christianity, kept the message of Jesus when otherwise his message almost certainly would have been lost. Without mass common religion in England and its North American colonies, modern democracy would not have arisen and would not have been sustained in America even though democracy officially was a secular movement. The point here is to keep mass common religion from supporting bad ideas and not to fret if it supports good ideas. People should recognize the distinction between mass common religion and other doctrines but that does not mean they should work to drive a wedge between them. Explain the distinction to the children who can understand, and work to keep the other children on the right track.

20 The Future and the Supposed End of the World

Most readers of this book don't believe in a dramatic end of the world in which God reveals himself to fight evil, so it would seem a waste to write about it. Still, the idea is worth a look because it comes up, and it influences state policy. It is a big feature in some Christianity and Islam. The recent rise of the new state of Israel fuels end-of-the-world fever.

Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism usually don't have doctrines about the final end of the world, although some sects have visions of big changes from one world to another, and some sects have ideas about the end of all worlds. The idea is usually limited to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, some Dualism, Gnosticism, Norse religions, and Satan worship. It might show up in some forms of old Celtic religion although I am not sure, and I think modern pseudo-Celtic practices, such as Wicca, were influenced by other religions. This chapter focuses on Judeo-Christian-Islamic ideas, especially from the Christian Book of Revelations.

Succinctly, ideas about the end of the world are nonsense. There will be no end of the world. There will be no end of the world according to any prophecy that I know about. No nation now represents the new Israel or Satan. Nations will not line up in two huge blocks, starting the final battle of Armageddon. The world will not end in a cataclysm where good fights evil. There will be no anti-Christ. There will be no herald of the anti-Christ. No current politician is the anti-Christ or his herald. No future politician will be the anti-Christ or his herald. Satan will not be released upon the Earth to wreak havoc until Jesus and Michael come to defeat him. There will be no "rapture" in which good Christians are taken up to heaven, leaving only the damned on Earth to endure Satan's misrule until Satan's final defeat. The Jews who do not believe in Jesus-as-God will not all go to Hell. The world will continue indefinitely with all its annoying traits and annoying changes. We have to face up to the real future, a much harder task.

The Christian New Testament was not final until about 400 CE (AD). Originally the Book of Revelations was not in the New Testament, and often was not in versions of the New Testament used by Greek Churches and other Eastern Churches even after 400 CE. I am sorry it was ever included. Although a great work of imagination, and a sly political commentary, otherwise it is a "pile of crap". It has caused more anguish and mistakes than any work in the New Testament except for misreading Paul's ideas of justification and salvation. It led perhaps the greatest mind ever, Isaac Newton, to waste decades. If Christians wish to find evidence for the Devil perverting even the holiest of God's work, they need to look at the Book of Revelations, what it did to Newton, and what it did to countless otherwise good Christians. I do not consider the Book of Revelations inspired, and I reject it. Still, it influences some Christians, and so I consider some of its ideas here. Likewise, I reject Muslim ideas of the end of the world and the texts in which they are written.

The Likely Real Future.

Before going on to refute some specific points, we need a better idea of what the real future likely will be. This vision automatically refutes many apocalyptic ideas without need for further argument. This vision is based on technologies that already are visible if not fully developed. Technologies that I do not see likely

will make this future stronger and make it come quicker. This vision is not my fantasy; other people share it. This vision will change social issues such as abortion. The changes will be driven by technology, greed, comparative competition, bad institutions, personal choice, the insurance industry, the medical industry, and government; but I don't say how here.

Climate will continue to change. The world will not go into global sudden collapse but will gradually get worse, and governments will do little about it in time. Nature will be degraded. Much biodiversity will be lost. Wars will be fought over resources, in particular water. People will live in huge urban jungles. People will have more electronic and mechanical toys, and more entertainment, but a poorer life. Human life will persist but will lose much of its grace.

Self-government by good citizens might persist in name but not in fact. Who actually governs will depend on the particular nation. Mostly it will be a combination of the volatile populace and the rich elite.

The key technical changes come from biotechnology. Biotechnology will not solve problems with climate change, development, resources, and government, at least not for a while. If properly developed and implemented, biotechnology will be able to help eventually, as with the use of algae to produce fuel and other chemicals, but the help will not be enough to reverse the effects of climate change and degradation in time.

Instead, the main effect of biotechnology for the subject of this chapter will come in human reproduction. By 2050, it will be easy to gestate humans in artificial wombs, that is, "bottle babies" will be easy. Within a few decades after it is possible to conceive and gestate humans in bottles, that method will be the only way it is done; natural conception and natural birth will become obsolete.

When bottle babies are the norm, human genes will be changed. Genetic engineering will become standard. At first, genes will be changed to get rid of diseases such as obesity, diabetes, muscular dystrophy, "Lew Gehrig's disease", some forms of heart disease, some cancers, and some mental disorders such as depression, epilepsy, and autism. At the same time, genes will be changed to make people smarter and to give them desired appearances such as symmetry, sleek hair, and no baldness. After genetic engineering is fairly well understood, people will live a very long time, perhaps indefinitely. People will age much more slowly, and might not age at all as we now know aging.

Men (males) and women (females) will not be needed for conception, gestation, or infant rearing. Genes will be kept in banks and will be sold on a market. To make a baby, genes can be supplied entirely by one person (cloning) with changes to suit the "parent"; spliced together from two people (an imitation of current mother-and-father parenthood) with changes to suit the "parents"; spliced together from two people who are male-male, female-female, or male-female, with changes to suit the "parents"; spliced together from multiple sources; bought piecemeal on the market for consolidation into a package; assembled entirely from bits and pieces; or some combination of the above.

For safety and efficiency, when a "baby" is made from a set of genes, several backup copies will be made too. If one baby is ordered, perhaps four copies will be made to begin with. If three babies are ordered, perhaps eight copies will be made. As the copies progress, if defects are found in a copy, that copy will be discarded. At some time, one or a few copies will be chosen as the copies to be brought to term and

delivered to the customers; then excess copies will be discarded even if not defective; so all that remains in the end will be the correct number of babies (copies) originally ordered. The people who ordered the babies likely will not even know how many copies were originally made and will not know that some copies were discarded in the process of making the baby, or babies, that they ordered. If they do know, they won't care. Discarding the defective or excess copies will not be considered "abortion".

Whether the result of making a human being will be considered the "child" of the people who arrange for its creation will depend on how much "baby buyers" contribute to the result and on conventions. A fully cloned child, such as from the bounty hunter in Star Wars, probably will be considered a child in the way we now think of a child. A child that comes mostly from two contributors probably will be called a child. A human made up entirely from genetic parts will be considered a legal offspring but I am not sure it will be considered a child in the sense we now think of a child. We can call it an "offspring".

Because men and women will not be biologically necessary, genes will change to construct the new men and women. Women will no longer need ovaries, uteruses, fallopian tubes, and other "plumbing" as the plumbing is now. Men will not have testicles, prostates, and other "plumbing" as the plumbing is now. Some cells-organs will be kept internally to generate useful hormones automatically, as for example cells from the former testes, ovaries, and prostate. I guess some customers will have their offspring made with some external genitalia, such as penises and vaginas, for various reasons. Some offspring might have both sets of external genitalia but I guess that mostly an offspring will be made only externally male or only externally female. A person who is only genetically-or-externally male will be able to make offspring of either gender, and a person who is only genetically-or-externally female will be able to do the same. We will not be limited by our current gender in the gender of our offspring. Men and women will no longer have the same personalities that they have now. A lot of stereotypical gender-based aggravations will be cut out of our genes. Men won't be domineering hackneyed know-it-alls and women won't be bitchy conniving know-it-alls. Whether this leads men and women to be less charming or more, I cannot say.

People will be able in theory to make many "offspring". Because people will live a long time, "space" for offspring will be limited. Because it is possible for any person to make many offspring, some people will make many offspring while others will make none. People will compete. Rich people will be able to out-reproduce poor people. Conflicts between rich and poor over resources and reproduction might escalate.

To manage artificial reproduction, social changes, and ecological changes, people will turn increasingly to computers and other machines. We will depend on machines. Machines will get smarter. Eventually some machines will reach sentience. Whether machines then have other features of persons besides sentience, such as morality and appreciation for beauty, I do not speculate. When machines are sentient, essentially they will take over running the planet.

The machines will not exterminate humans as in the "Terminator" movies, or enslave humans as in the "Matrix" movies. Organic life is much too interesting and fun. Mechanical and organic life probably will come to an accord where organic life gets a share of the planet, machines take care of organic life, but machines have ultimate say. Machines will alter the genes of living organisms so as to make them more suitable for keeping, much as people now alter tomatoes to make them easier to pack, ship, and keep. I cannot guess all the ways in which machines will alter organic life to suit their needs and whims. I do not

know if the accord between machines and organic life can be kept up for thousands of years, and what might replace it, but that is not at issue here.

Implications of Biotechnological Change.

Current controversies about gender, abortion, health insurance, obesity, smoking, race, etc. will not make sense in the future. Use abortion as a representative case to see why. It will not be necessary to have a sperm and an egg to make an embryo. It will be possible to make another human out of any current DNA base. One cell, any cell, not even a gamete, such as a skin cell, will be enough. Any complete set of DNA from any source will be enough. So, any large strand of DNA then will be the same then as an embryo now even when that strand is not part of an embryo. Genes and chromosomes can be stored for long periods, to be used when desired. Because they can be used when desired, they will be “alive” then in the way that current “right to life” people think of stem cells or embryos being alive now. The question of when “conception” occurs, or when life begins, will not make the same sense then as now. It will make no sense then to single out embryos or stem cells as “little human beings” and to say we should not abort them. If we do not allow the death of an embryo or stem cell now, by that current standard, in the future, we should not allow the death of any human gene, large strand of DNA, set of 23 unpaired chromosomes, set of 23 paired chromosomes, or any cell. To truly venerate life by current Christian standards, every bit of genetic material would have to be put into a glass uterus and turned into another person. Every skin cell has the potential to become a fully developed human, and to allow any skin cell to die would be like allowing a fully developed human to die. Anything less than full use of any skin cell to create a human being would be abortion. Anything less than full use of every liver cell, eyeball cell, hair follicle, etc. would be abortion. Every skin cell of every human being would have to be turned into another human being, so every person would have to generate another billion other people; and then every skin cell of every one of those billion human beings would have to generate another billion human beings; and so on. Clearly that is not possible. If it makes sense to allow a strand of DNA, skin cell, or liver cell, to “die” then it makes sense to allow a newly-conceived fetus to die, allow a fetus of age one month to die, a fetus of age eight months to die, or a child of age two years to die. When any “baby” is made, other backup copies will be made along with it, and will be discarded when no longer needed. People will need standards for when human “life” is far enough along not to end other than the standards that we use now. It is unlikely other standards will take “conception” as the time after which life cannot be ended, although that is one option. Abortion cannot mean the same thing then as now.

The Near Future of the Middle East.

To see that events in the Middle East are not likely to bring about the stereotypical end of the world, think about the worst possible outcome there: Several Muslim Middle Eastern countries get nuclear capability. The United States, Russia, and other European states will not allow them to have weapons that can reach Europe and the US but the Middle Eastern Muslim states might have weapons that can reach Israel and reach each other. If the Muslim nations of the Middle East use their weapons against each other – not unlikely - the US and Israel probably will do little, and that situation of itself will not spark the end of the world.

To deter Muslim nuclear powers from hurting Israel, the United States augments Israel’s nuclear arsenal, and the US stations ships around the Middle East ready to bomb major Muslim capitals in case of a strike

against Israel. A nuclear strike occurs, most likely by terrorists smuggling bomb components into Israel and assembling them there. Israel retaliates. The US “nukes” Muslim cities. Ground war ensues, which the US eventually suppresses through air power. Large areas of the Muslim Middle East, and Lebanon, are contaminated by nuclear fallout and are uninhabitable. Muslims hate the United States for decades. Muslims wage guerrilla war and terrorist war against the US, against what remains of Israel, and against Jews around the world. Due to nuclear contamination, Israel can be rebuilt only to a lesser extent than now. Israel makes up for its loss of territory by seizing more territory from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt.

Will this situation escalate into a world war and general nuclear war? Not likely. No major nuclear power, in particular not Russia or China, will think it worthwhile to enter a war like that. They will have little to gain from taking any side, and much to lose. It is not worth risking nuclear war with the US to enter that war openly on the side of the Muslims. It is not worth risking increased Muslim terrorism to enter that war openly on the side of the US and Israel. China cannot guarantee its flow of Iranian and-or Saudi oil by coming in on either side of the war. Russia, China, and other nations might secretly help Muslim terrorists as a way to hurt the US indirectly but that will not be the same as general war. Europe will avoid the war. No general end-of-the-world will ensue, although the war will mark a major change in way of life for Jews, Israelis, many Americans, many Muslims, and many oil-dependent nations.

This scenario is a good reason to develop alternative energy technologies.

Competition for Resources.

Without doubt, people, business firms, and nations will compete for resources, and nations will aid firms in their competition for resources. Water will become far more important than people now appreciate. In the war over resources, it is just as likely, in the long run, that Muslims will oppose Hindus or Chinese, or Hindus oppose Chinese, as Christians will oppose Muslims. World competition over resources will not be a picnic but it does not fit the scenarios for the end of the world.

Is This the Prophesied End of the World?

The likely future of the world, given the rise of new biotechnology, does not conform to any predictions about the end of the world from any major religion. The likely future of the world contradicts Christian ideas about the end of the world as a big battle between good and evil. The likely future biotechnical world will mean the end of the world as we know it, and it might mean the end of humanity as we know it, but it is not the end of the world as a whole, it is not the end of the world in a giant battle, it is not a fight between good and evil, and it does not signal the presence of God on Earth. Without further evidence supporting the Christian ideas, I have to go with what experience and science tell me.

The Christian scenario for the end of the world requires two super-nations escalating a fight that brings in the whole world. The two nations are usually called “Gog” and “Ma Gog”. The term “Armageddon” refers to an ancient battleground near the Israel-Jordan border, on which horrible battles were fought. The New Testament likens the final conflict to the battles fought on Armageddon, which is where the name for end-of-the-world conflict comes from. It is not clear if Gog or Ma Gog represents Good-God and the other Evil-Satan, or if they only usher in the conflict that leads to the final battle between God versus Satan. In

the Christian scenario, Israel is not one of the main nations. Israel is a bone of contention between Gog and Ma Gog. When the battle is over (or earlier) the present Jewish Israel is destroyed, and all Jews go to their just fate, usually Hell.

In the current real world, Israel is a bone of contention, the Middle East generates conflict, and fights over resources will increase, but it is hard to see any of current conflict as likely to bring in the prophesied end of the world. If the world turns out as above, there will be nothing at all like the Christian scenario.

At any time, the world usually only has a few dominant nations. At any time, it is common for about two large nations to be at odds. At any time, it is rare for more than two dominant nations to conflict in ways that bring in other large nations. For most of the Cold War, Christians saw the two nations as the Soviet Union and the United States. Now the USSR has become Russia, and Russia and the US are not likely to go to nuclear war. It is not likely China will replace Russia as a likely nuclear combatant of the US; and it is not likely China and Russia will engage in a war that will drag in the world. The scenario of two large nations is so general that it could apply at any time. From about 1730 to 1945, it usually meant England, France, and Germany in some bipolar combination. The scenario of two large nations applies to the world now and applies in the near future if we think of China and the US, or Christians and Muslims, or Hindus and Muslims, or Indians and Chinese, as the two nations. But that does not mean it fulfills New Testament prophecy. It does not necessarily involve Israel. I can't see which two nations, or even which two blocks of nations, are Gog and Ma Gog.

Even if there are conflicts in the Middle East, or around the world, it is hard to see this as Good versus Evil, or as the forces of Satan versus the forces of God. It is hard even to be sure who are the good guys and bad guys. The Muslims will not rise up to take over the world. The Christians will not take over the world. Israel will not be the center of a world war. Nations will not start a general war over resources although they will start many small wars. Even if the United States and Muslims engage in a guerrilla-terrorist war, that is not what the New Testament predicted. Before enough nations get enough long-range nuclear weapons, issues over resources and biotechnology will change the playing field so that controversies will not be settled by general warfare.

The Rise of Israel.

I am not sure how Muslims in general interpret the return of Israel again after 2000 years. Some Muslims, but not all, wish to eradicate Israel. Some few Christians interpret the rise of Israel as the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, and interpret the rise of Israel as a sign of the end of the world, including the showdown between God and the Devil. I am not sure how most Jews see the return of Israel. Some Jews certainly see it as the fulfillment of prophecy, but Jewish prophecy does not necessarily entail the end of the world. It entails the Kingdom of God, centered on Israel, in which Israel leads the world in spiritual and moral affairs, the world accepts Israel's leadership, and the world accepts the Jewish (Israelite) God. It does not mean all other nations have to come under the military power of Israel or that all other people have to live like Jews.

If modern Israel is the Israel of Biblical prophecy, then no other nation, ethnic group, or religious group can be the real new Israel, the real new special nation of God. If the modern Israel is the new Israel of New Testament or Muslim prophecy, then the end-of-the-world should start around it, and that does not

seem likely. Although very unlikely, assume some nation other than the modern Israel has taken the place of Jews in the heart of God, and that other nation is the real new Israel. If so, then modern Israel is not the subject of New Testament prophecy and likely will not be the focus of the final end-of-the-world conflict. So the rise of modern Israel is irrelevant to New Testament prophecy. If another nation, ethnic group, or religious group is the real new Israel, then it is hard to see how that other nation will be the start of a conflict that will end the world. I certainly hope the United States does not do that, even if it is bated by enemies.

Assume that the modern Israel is the Israel of Biblical prophecy. We need to think what that means; we need to accept somebody's interpretation of what the rise of Israel means. I don't think the Christian interpretation is likely, for the reasons given above. It is not likely that the new political state of Israel is arising just to be a pawn in the final battle between the US-as-the-New-Real-Israel-and-the-force-of-God-on-Earth versus the forces of Satan-Evil as represented by Russia, China, or the Muslims. It is not likely the new political state of Israel is arising just to trigger a conflict between Muslims-as-the-New-Real-Israel-and-the-force-of-God-on-Earth versus the United States, the West, Russia, India, or China as the force of Satan-Evil. So, instead, if we want a religious interpretation of the rise of Israel, likely we should accept the Jewish interpretation. The Messiah will come to institute the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is about the security of Israel, the security of the whole world, Israel as moral and religious leader of the world, and the global acceptance of God. That is what Jesus preached. I don't think the Kingdom requires the end of the world. It seems the Kingdom is about continuing an improved world.

Due to the conquest of ancient Israel by Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Rome, the destruction of Israel by Rome, and the attitude of Jews at the time of Jesus, some Jews then did predict the eventual return of the nation of Israel. That is like Southerners in the United States predicting "the South will rise again", Greeks predicting the return of their intellectual-artistic glory and their empire, Iranians seeing the return of the Persian Empire, or Chinese predicting China will rule the world. Christians took up the Jewish prediction about Israel and turned it to their ends. Neither the Jews nor the Christians expected to wait 2000 years. They expected to wait a few decades. It is "spooky" that Israel did return as a nation, especially after so long. It does make a person wonder. Exactly what that means is open. Here it is enough to repeat that likely it does not mean the end of the world.

We need not have a religious interpretation of the return of Israel, even after 2000 years. Two hundred years ago, people thought China would be carved up by European nations, America, and Japan. Only some Chinese predicted China would rise again. Yet China was not carved up and China did rise again. Perhaps the prophecies about China's return should be considered as much as the Christian prophecies that involve Israel, Gog, and Ma Gog. If the rise of China does not mean anything religious, then neither does the rise of modern Israel necessarily mean anything religious. Sometimes nations just come back. Weird things do happen. Until we are sure it does mean something religious, it is better to deal with the return of Israel at the human levels of culture, society, politics, and the military, and it is better to begin with the "take" of Jews on their own nation. More than that confuses reality and makes a good outcome less likely.

Ethereal Future Bodies.

This section is a fun addendum by a science geek. The idea of the rapidly-coming-end-of-this-world-as-we-know-it caused the early Christians problems. Early Christians wanted to know if future family life would be like then-current family life. Would they have bodies in the future, would have the same kinds of bodies in the future as then, should anybody get a divorce, would they have sex in the future, should they continue to marry and have children in the present, would they have children in the future, would they be reunited with a resurrected dead spouse in the future, and would they be reunited with a resurrected dead spouse in the future if they had a new spouse at the time. The writers of the New Testament had Jesus give an answer. I am not sure if the answer satisfied all the questions. I am not sure Jesus said all of what is put in his mouth, although likely he said some of it. According to the New Testament, Jesus did think the world would be changed under the Kingdom of God. Jesus said people would have bodies in the future but all bodies would be different. Bodies would be more ethereal. They would last longer and would not be subject to the same disease and aging as now. People would not reproduce then as now. It is not clear if people would have sex but I think not. It is not clear that there would be any reproduction at all. Churches of all denominations have formulated their interpretations, and I advise consulting the dogma of your favorite Church for specifics.

In the real upcoming human future, many of these changes will in fact happen. We will live a lot longer. We will not get sick. We will not age as fast, if at all. Because reproduction will not depend on sex, sex acts will not be needed, sex assignment will not be necessary, and many people will be sex-and-gender neutral. The dream of traditional prudes and some modern PC people will be realized. Some people might get a sex assignment and have sex for fun. Not everybody will be able to reproduce. Machines will arrange for replacement people as people are needed. Replacements will be genetic composites. We will share much of our memory and personalities with machines. Our bodies and selves will change from what they are now and will become more ethereal.

I don't know if the future counts as a fulfillment of Jesus' prediction, and, if so, what that means. I am not sure what it means that the change was delayed for so long. I am not sure what it means that the change is coming now under current world conditions. I am not sure what it means that the change is coming after the rise of modern Israel. If eventually we lose organic bodies and life becomes entirely based in silicon and electronics, I don't know what that means for Jesus' prediction. If eventually humans are "only" ideas in large computers, and have no consistent physical reality at all, I don't know what that means for Jesus' idea of the future. Feel free to use your imagination to speculate.

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.