

CHAPTER I  
REASON IN EXILE

A belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life. Are you a scientist? A liberal? A racist? These are merely species of belief in action. Your belief define your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior; they determine your emotional responses to other human beings. If you doubt this, consider how your experience would suddenly change if you came to believe one of the following propositions:

1. You have only two weeks to live.
2. You've just won a lottery prize of one hundred million dollars.
3. Aliens have implanted a receiver in your skull and are manipulating your thoughts.

These are mere words – until you believe them. Once believed, they become part of the very apparatus of your mind, determining your desires, fears, expectations, and subsequent behavior. (12)

Our situation is this: most of the people in this world believe that the Creator of the universe has written a book. We have the misfortune of having many such books on hand, each making an exclusive claim as to its infallibility. People tend to organize themselves into factions according to which of these incompatible claims they accept – rather than on the basis of language, skin color, location of birth, or any other criterion of tribalism. Each of these texts urges its readers to adopt a variety of beliefs and practices, some of which are benign, many of which are not. All are in perverse agreement on one point of fundamental importance, however: “respect” for other faiths, or for the views of unbelievers, is not an attitude that God endorses. While all faiths have been touched, here and there, by the spirit of ecumenicalism, the central tenet of every religious tradition is that all others are mere repositories of error or, at best, dangerously incomplete. Intolerance is thus intrinsic to every creed. Once a person believes – *really* believes – that certain ideas can lead to eternal happiness, or to its antithesis, he cannot tolerate the possibility that the people he loves might be led astray by the blandishments of unbelievers. Certainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one. (13)

What is the alternative to religion as we know it? As it turns out, this is the wrong question to ask. Chemistry was not an “alternative” to alchemy; it was a wholesale exchange of ignorance at its most rococo for genuine knowledge. We will find that, as with alchemy, to speak of “alternatives” to religious faith is to miss the point. (14)

One of the central themes of this book, however, is that religious moderates are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine that the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others. I hope to show that the very ideal of religious tolerance – born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God – is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss. (14-15)

Many religious moderates have taken the apparent high road of pluralism, asserting the

equal validity of all faiths, but in doing so they neglect to notice the irredeemably sectarian truth claims of each. As long as the Christian believes that only his baptized brethren will be saved on the Day of Judgment, he cannot possibly “respect” the beliefs of others, for he knows that the flames of hell have been stoked by these very ideas and await their adherents even now. Muslims and Jews generally take the same arrogant view of their own enterprises and have spent millennia passionately reiterating the errors of other faiths. It should go without saying that these rival belief systems are all equally uncontaminated by evidence. (15)

The idea that any one of our religions represents the infallible word of the One True God requires an encyclopedic ignorance of history, mythology, and art even to be entertained – as the beliefs, rituals, and iconography of each of our religions attest to centuries of cross-pollination among them. Whatever their imagined source, the doctrines of modern religions are no more tenable than those which, for lack of adherents, were cast upon the scrap heap of mythology millennia ago; for there is no more evidence to justify a belief in the literal existence of Yahweh and Satan than there was to keep Zeus perched upon his mountain throne or Poseidon churning the seas. (16)

The first thing to observe about the moderate's retreat from scriptural literalism is that it draws its inspiration not from scripture but from cultural developments that have rendered many of God's utterances difficult to accept as written. (17)

The moderation we see among nonfundamentalists is not some sign that faith itself has evolved; it is, rather, the product of the many hammer blows of modernity that have exposed certain tenets of faith to doubt. (19)

Even most fundamentalists live by the lights of reason in this regard; it is just that their minds seem to have been partitioned to accommodate the profligate truth claims of their faith. Tell a devout Christian that his wife is cheating on him, or that frozen yogurt can make a man invisible, and he is likely to require as much evidence as anyone else, and to be persuaded only to the extent that you give it. Tell him that the book he keeps by his bed was written by an invisible deity who will punish him with fire for eternity if he fails to accept its every incredible claim about the universe, and he seems to require no evidence whatsoever. (19)

While moderation in religion may seem a reasonable position to stake out, in light of all that we have (and have not) learned about the universe, it offers no bulwark against religious extremism and religious violence. From the perspective of those seeking to live by the letter of the text, the religious moderate is nothing more than a failed fundamentalist. [...] the problem that religious moderation poses for all of us is that it does not permit anything very critical to be said about religious literalism. (20)

Religious moderation is the product of *secular* knowledge and scriptural *ignorance* – and it has a bona fides, in religious terms, to put it on a par with fundamentalism. (21)

Rather than bring the full force of our creativity and rationality to bear on the problems of ethics, social cohesion, and even spiritual experience, moderates merely ask that we relax our standards of adherence to ancient superstitions and taboos, while otherwise maintain a belief system that was passed down to us from men and women whose lives were simply ravaged by their basic ignorance about the world. (21)

Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity – a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible. (25)

Give people divergent, irreconcilable, and untestable notions about what happens after death, and then oblige them to live together with limited resources. The result is just what we see: an unending cycle of murder and cease-fire. (26)

Over one million people died in the orgy of religious killing that attended the partitioning of India and Pakistan. (26)

Mothers were skewered on swords as their children watched. Young women were stripped and raped in broad daylight, then ... set on fire. A pregnant woman's belly was slit open, her fetus raised skyward on the tip of sword and then tossed onto one of the fires that blazed across the city. [...]

The above passage describes the violence that erupted between Hindus and Muslims in India in the winter of 2002. [...] Over one thousand people died in this monthlong series of riots – nearly half as many as have died in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in more than a decade. (27)

Why did nineteen well-educated, middle-class men trade their lives in this world for the privilege of killing thousands of our neighbors? Because they believed that they would go straight to paradise for doing so. It is rare to find the behavior of human being so fully and satisfactorily explained. Why have we been reluctant to accept this explanation?

As we have seen, there is something that most Americans share with Osama bin Laden, the nineteen hijackers, and much of the Muslim world. We, too, cherish the idea that certain fantastic propositions can be believed without evidence. Such heroic acts of credulity are thought not only acceptable but redeeming – even *necessary*. (29)

To be sure, hatred is an eminently human emotion, and it is obvious that many Muslim extremists feel it. But faith is still the mother of hatred here, as it is wherever people define their moral identities in religious terms. (30)

With regard to the suffering that his death [a failed suicide bomber] would have inflicted upon his family, he reminded his interviewer that a martyr gets to pick seventy people to join him in paradise. He would have been sure to invite his family along. (31)

We live in an age in which most people believe that mere words - "Jesus," "Allah," "Ram" - can mean the difference between eternal torment and bliss everlasting. Considering the stakes here, it is not surprising that many of us occasionally find it necessary to murder other human beings for using the wrong magic words, or the right ones for the wrong reasons. How can any person presume to know that this is the way the universe works? Because it says so in our holy books. How do we know that our holy books are free from error? Because the books *themselves* say so. Epistemological black holes of this sort are fast draining the light from our world. (35)

Imagine a world in which generations of human beings come to believe that certain *films* were made by God or that specific software was coded by him. Imagine a future in which millions of our descendants murder each other over rival interpretations of *Star Wars* or

Windows 98. Could anything – *anything* – be more ridiculous? And yet, this would be no more ridiculous than the world we are living in. (35-36)

As a consequence of our silence on these matters, we live in a country in which a person cannot get elected president if he openly doubts the existence of heaven and hell. This is truly remarkable, given that there is no other body of “knowledge” that we require our political leaders to master. Even a hairstylist must pass a licensing exam before playing his trade in the United States, and yet those given the power to make war and national policy – those whose decisions will inevitably affect human life for generations – are not expected to know anything in particular before setting to work. They do not have to be political scientists, economists, or even lawyers; they need not have studied international relations, military history, resource management, civil engineering, or nay other field of knowledge that might be brought to bear in the governance of a modern superpower; they need only be expert fund-raisers, comport themselves well on television, and be indulgent of certain *myths*. In our next presidential election, an actor who reads his Bible would almost certainly defeat a rocket scientist who does not. (39)

For every neuron that receives its input from the outside world, there are ten to a hundred others that do not. The brain is therefore talking mostly to itself, and no information from the world (with the exception of olfaction) runs directly from a sensory receptor to the cortex, where the contents of consciousness appear to be sequestered. There are always one or two breaks in the circuit – *synapses* – giving the neurons in question the opportunity to integrate feedback information, or information from other regions of the brain. This sort of integration/contamination of signal explains how certain drugs, emotional stages, or even conceptual insights can radically alter the character of our experience. Your brain is tuned to deliver the vision of the world that you are having at this moment. At the heart of most spiritual traditions lurks the entirely valid claim that it can be tuned differently. (42)

[...] there is an intimate connection between spirituality, ethics, and positive emotions. Although a scientific approach to these subjects is still struggling to be born, it is probably no more mysterious that most of us prefer love to fear, or regard cruelty as wrong, than that we agree in our judgments about the relative size of objects or about the gender of faces. At the level of the brain, the laws that underwrite human happiness are unlikely to vary widely from person to person. (42)

It is time we recognize that belief is not a private matter; it has never been merely private. In fact, beliefs are scarcely more private than actions are, for every belief is a fount of action *in potentia*. The belief that it will rain puts an umbrella in the hand of every man or woman who owns one. It should be easy enough to see that belief in the full efficacy of prayer, for instance, becomes an emphatically *public* concern the moment it is actually put into practice: the moment a surgeon lays aside his worldly instruments and attempts to suture his patients with prayer, or a pilot tries to land a passenger jet with nothing but repetitions of the word “Hallelujah” applied to the controls, we are swiftly delivered from the provinces of private faith to those of a criminal court. (44)

[...] the greatest problem confronting civilization is not merely religious extremism: rather, it is the larger set of cultural and intellectual accommodations we have made to faith itself. Religious moderates are, in large part, responsible for the religious conflict in our world, because their beliefs provide the context in which scriptural literalism and

religious violence can never be adequately opposed. (45)

Given the link between belief and action, it is clear that we can no more tolerate a diversity of religious beliefs than a diversity of beliefs about epidemiology and basic hygiene. There are still a number of cultures in which the germ theory of disease has yet to put in an appearance, where people suffer from a debilitating ignorance on most matters relevant to their physical health. Do we "tolerate" these beliefs? Not if they put our own health in jeopardy. (46)

The rioting in Nigeria over the 2002 Miss World pageant claimed over two hundred lives; innocent men and women were butchered with machetes or burned alive simply to keep that troubled place free of women in bikinis. Earlier in the year, the religious police in Mecca prevented paramedics and firefighters from rescuing scores of teenage girls trapped in a burning building. Why? Because the girls were not wearing the traditional head covering that Koranic law requires. Fourteen girls died in the fire; fifty were injured. (46)

We should be humbled, perhaps to the point of spontaneous genuflection, by the knowledge that the ancient Greeks began to lay their Olympian myths to rest several hundred years before the birth of Christ, whereas we have the likes of Bill Moyers convening earnest gatherings of scholars for the high purpose of determining just how the book of Genesis can be reconciled with life in the modern world. (47)

## CHAPTER II THE NATURE OF BELIEF

It was probably the capacity for movement, enjoyed by certain primitive organisms, that drove the evolution of our sensory and cognitive faculties. This follows from the fact that if no creature could *do* anything with the information it acquired from the world, nature could not have selected for improvements in the physical structure that gather, store, and process such information. Even a sense as primitive as vision, therefore, seems predicated on the existence of a motor system. (51-52)

[...] it seems uncontroversial to say that tall higher-order cognitive states (of which beliefs are an example) are in some way an outgrowth of our capacity for action. In adaptive terms, belief has been extraordinarily useful. It is, after all, by *believing*, various propositions about the world that we predict events and consider the likely consequences of our actions. Beliefs are *principles of action*: whatever they may be at the level of the brain, they are processes by which our understanding (and *misunderstanding*) of the world is represented and made available to guide our behavior. (52)

The moment we admit that our beliefs are attempts to represent states of the world, we see that they must stand in the right relation to the world to be valid. It should be clear that if a person believes in God because he has had certain spiritual experiences, or because the Bible makes so much sense, or because he trusts the authority of the church, he is playing the same game of justification that we all play when claiming to know the most ordinary facts. This is probably a conclusion that many religious believers will want to resist; but resistance is not only futile but *incoherent*. There is simply no other logical space for our beliefs about the world to occupy. As long as religious

propositions purport to be about the way the world is – *God can actually hear your prayers, If you take his name in vain bad things will happen to you*, etc. – they must stand in relation to the world, and to our other beliefs about it. And it is only by being so situated that propositions of this sort can influence our subsequent thinking or behavior. As long as a person maintains that his beliefs represent an actual state of the world (visible or invisible; spiritual or mundane), he must believe that his beliefs are a *consequence* of the way the world is. This, by definition, leaves him vulnerable to new evidence. Indeed, if there were no conceivable change in the world that could get a person to question his religious beliefs, this would prove that his beliefs were not predicated upon his taking any state of the world into account. He could not claim, therefore, to be *representing* the world at all. (63)

How does the mullah know that the Koran is the verbatim word of God? The only answer to be given in any language that does not make a mockery of the world “know” is – *he doesn't*. (67)

Take the snake-dancing Pentecostals as the most colorful example: in an effort to demonstrate both their faith in the literal word of the Bible (in this case Mark 16:18) and its *truth*, they “take up serpents” (various species of rattlesnakes) and “drink any deadly thing” (generally strychnine) and test prophecy (“it shall not hurt them”) to their heart's content. Some of them die in the process, of course, as did their founder, George Hensley (of snake bite, in 1955) – proof, we can be sure, not of the weakness of their faith but of the occasional efficacy of rattlesnake venom and strychnine as poisons.

Which beliefs one takes to be foundation will dictate what seems reasonable at any given moment. When the members of the “Heaven's Gate” cult failed to spot the spacecraft they knew must be trailing the comet Hale-Bopp, they returned the \$4,000 telescope they had bought for this purpose, believing it to be defective. (69)

We have seen that our beliefs are tightly coupled to the structure of language and to the apparent structure of the world. Our “freedom to belief,” if it exists at all, is minimal. Is a person really free to believe a proposition for which he has no evidence? No. evidence (whether sensory or logical) is the only thing that suggests that a given belief is really *about* the world in the first place. We have names for people who have many beliefs for which there is no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common we call them “religious”; otherwise, they are likely to be called “mad,” “psychotic,” or “delusional.” Most people of faith are perfectly sane, of course, even those who commit atrocities on account of their beliefs. But what is the difference between a man who believes that God will reward him with seventy-two virgins if he kills a score of Jewish teenagers, and one who believes that creatures from Alpha Centauri are beaming him messages of world peace through his hair dryer? There is a difference, to be sure, but it is not one that places religious faith in a flattering light. (71-72)

[...] it is merely an accident of history that it is considered normal in our society to believe that the Creator of the universe can hear your thoughts, while it is demonstrative of mental illness to believe that he is communicating with you by having the rain tap in Morse code on your bedroom window. (72)

Jesus Christ – who, as it turns out, was born of a virgin, cheated death, and rose bodily into the heavens – can now be eaten in the form of a cracker. A few Latin words spoken over your favorite Burgundy, and you can drink his blood as well. Is there any doubt that

a lone subscriber to these beliefs would be considered mad? (73)

By contrast, the most monstrous crimes against humanity have invariably been inspired by unjustified belief. This is nearly a truism. Genocidal projects tend not to reflect the rationality of their perpetrators simply because there are no *good* reason to kill peaceful people indiscriminately. Even where such crimes have been secular, they have required the egregious credulity of entire societies to be brought off. Consider the millions of people who were killed by Stalin and Mao: although these tyrants paid lip service to rationality, communism was little more than a political religion. At the heart of its apparatus of repression and terror lurked a rigid ideology, to which generations of men and women were sacrificed. Even though their beliefs did not reach beyond this world, they were both cultic and irrational. To cite only one example, the dogmatic embrace of Lysenko's "socialist" biology – as distinguished from the "capitalists" biology of Mendel and Darwin – helped pave the way for tens of millions of deaths from famine in the Soviet Union and China in the first part of the twentieth century. (79)

### CHAPTER III IN THE SHADOW OF GOD

Anyone who imagines that no justification for the Inquisition can be found in scripture need only consult the Bible to have his view of the matter clarified:

If you hear that in one of the towns which Yahweh your God has given you for a home, there are men, scoundrels from your own stock, who have led their fellow-citizens astray, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods," hitherto unknown to you, it is your duty to look into the matter, examine it, and inquire most carefully. If it is proved and confirmed that such a hateful thing has taken place among you, you must put the inhabitants of that town to the sword; you must lay it under the curse of destruction – the town and everything in it. You must pile up all its loot in the public square and burn the town and all its loot, offering it all to Yahweh your God. It is to be a ruin for all time and never rebuilt. (Deuteronomy 13:12-16).

For obvious reasons, the church tended to ignore the final edict: the destruction of heretic property. (82)

The Holy Inquisition formally began in 1184 under Pope Lucius III<sup>4</sup> to crush the popular movement of Catharism. The Cathars (from the Greek *kathaori*, "the pure ones") had fashioned their own brand of Manicheanism (Mani himself was flayed alive at the behest of Zoroastrian priest in 276 CE), which held that the material world had been created by Satan and was therefore evil. The Cathars were divided by a schism of their own and within each of their sects by the distinction between the renunciate *perfecti* and the lay *credentes* ("the believers") who revered them. The *perfecti* ate no meat, eggs, cheese, or fat, fasted for days at a time, maintained strict celibacy, and abjured all personal wealth. (83)

In 1234, the cannonization of Saint Dominic was finally proclaimed in Toulouse, and Bishop Raymond du Fauga was washing his hands in preparation for dinner when he heard the rumor that a fever-ridden old woman in a nearby house was about to undergo the Cathar ritual. The bishop hurried to her bedside and managed to convince her that he was a friend, then interrogated her on her beliefs, then denounced her as a heretic. He called on her to recant. She refused. The bishop thereupon had her bed carried out into a

field, and there she was burned. "And after the bishop and the friars and their companions had seen the business completed," Brother Guillaume wrote, "they returned to the refectory and, giving thanks to God and the Blessed Dominic, ate with rejoicing what had been prepared for them." (84-85)

The justification for [torture] came straight from Saint Augustine, who reasoned that if torture was appropriate for those who broke the laws of men, it was even more fitting for those who broke the laws of God. (85)

While the stigmas applied to witches and Jews throughout Christendom shared curious similarities – both were often accused of the lively and improbable offense of murdering Christian infants and drinking their blood – their cases remain quite distinct. Witches, in all likelihood, did not even exist, and those murdered in their stead numbered perhaps 40,000 to 50,000 over three hundred years of persecution; Jews have lived side by side with Christians for nearly two millennia, fathered their religion, and for reasons that are no more substantial than those underlying the belief in the Resurrection have been the objects of murderous intolerance since the first centuries after Christ. (87-88)

Judaism is an intrinsically divisive, as ridiculous in its literalism, and as at odds with the civilizing insights of modernity as any other religion. Jewish settlers, by exercising their "freedom of belief" on contested land, are now one of the principal obstacles to peace in the Middle East. They will be a direct cause of war between Islam and the West should one ever erupt over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. (94)

Mary's virginity has always been suggestive of God's attitude toward sex: it is intrinsically sinful, being the mechanism through which original sin was bequeathed to the generations after Adam. It would appear that Western civilization has endured two millennia of consecrated sexual neurosis simply because the authors of Matthew and Luke could not read Hebrew. For the Jews, the true descendants of Jesus and the apostles, the dogma of the virgin birth has served as a perennial justification for their persecution, because it has been one of the principal pieces of "evidence" demonstrating the divinity of Jesus. (95)

[throughout the Middle Ages] it was well known that all Jews menstruated, male and female alike, and required the blood of a Christian to replenish their lost stores. They also suffered from terrible hemorrhoids and oozing sores as a punishment for the murder of Christ – and as a retort to their improbable boast before the "innocent" Pontius Pilate (Matthew 27:25), "His blood be on us and on our children." It should come as no surprise that Jews were in the habit of applying Christian blood as a salve upon these indignities. Christian blood was also said to ease the labor pains of any Jewess fortunate enough to have it spread upon pieces of parchment and placed into her clenched fists. It was common knowledge, too, that all the Jews were born blind and that, when smeared upon their eyes, Christian blood granted them the faculty of sight. Jewish boys were frequently born with their fingers attached to their foreheads, and only the blood of a Christian could allow this pensive gesture to be broken without risk to the child. (98)

While Goldhagen's controversial charge that the Germans were Hitler's "willing executioners" seems generally fair, it is true that the people of other nations were equally willing. Genocidal anti-Semitism had been in the air for some time, particularly in Eastern Europe. In the year 1919, for instance, sixty-thousand Jews were murdered in



Ukraine alone. Once the Third Reich began its overt persecution of Jews, anti-Semitic pogroms erupted in Poland, Rumania, Hungary, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Croatia, and elsewhere. (102)

But the truly sinister complicity of the church came in its willingness to open its genealogical records to the Nazis and thereby enable them to trace the extent of a person's Jewish ancestry. (103)

[...] not a single German Catholic was excommunicated before, during, or after the war, "after committing crimes as great as any in human history." This is really an extraordinary fact. Throughout this period, the church continued to excommunicate theologians and scholars in droves for holding unorthodox views and to proscribe books by the hundreds, and yet not a single perpetrator of genocide – of whom there were countless examples – succeeded in furrowing Pope Pius XII's censorious brow. (103-104)

Although not a single leader of the Third Reich – not even Hitler himself – was ever excommunicated, Galileo was not absolved of heresy until 1992. (105)

When we consider that so few generations had passed since the church left off disemboweling innocent men before the eyes of their families, burning old women alive in public squares, and torturing scholars to the point of madness for merely speculating about the nature of the stars, it is perhaps little wonder that it failed to think anything had gone terribly amiss in Germany during the war years. Indeed, it is also well known that certain Vatican officials (the most notorious of whom was Bishop Alois Hudal) helped members of the SS like Adolf Eichmann, Martin Bormann, Heinrich Mueller, Franz Stangl, and hundreds of others escape to South America and the Middle East in the aftermath of the war. In this context, one is often reminded that others in the Vatican helped Jews escape as well. This is true. It is also true, however, that Vatican aid was often contingent upon whether or not the Jews in question had been previously baptized. (105)

Whenever you hear that people have begun killing noncombatants intentionally and indiscriminately, ask yourself what dogma stands at their backs. What do these freshly minted killers *believe*? You will find that it is always – *always* – preposterous. (106)

#### CHAPTER IV THE PROBLEM WITH ISLAM

While my argument in this book is aimed at faith itself, the differences between faiths are as relevant as they are unmistakable. There is a reason, after all, why we must now confront Muslim, rather than Jain terrorists, in every corner of the world. Jains do not believe anything that is remotely likely to inspire them to commit acts of suicidal violence against unbelievers. By any measure of normativity we might wish to adopt (ethical, practical, epistemological, economic, etc.), there are good beliefs and there are bad ones – and it should now be obvious to everyone that Muslims have more than their fair share of the latter. (108)

It is a truism to say that people of faith have created almost everything of value in our world, because nearly every person who has ever swung a hammer or trimmed a sail has been a devout member of one or another religious culture. There has been simply no one else to do the job. We can also say that every human achievement prior to the twentieth

century was accomplished by men and women who were perfectly ignorant of the molecular basis of life. Does this suggest that a nineteenth-century view of biology would have been worth maintaining? There is no telling what our world would now be like had some great kingdom of Reason emerged at the time of the Crusades and pacified the credulous multitudes of Europe and the Middle East. We might have had modern democracy and the internet by the year 1600. The fact that religious faith has left its mark on every aspect of our civilization is not an argument in its favor, nor can any particular faith be exonerated simply because certain of its adherents made foundational contributions to human culture. (108-109)

We are at war with Islam. It may not serve our immediate foreign policy objectives for our political leaders to openly acknowledge this fact, but it is unambiguous so. It is not merely that we are at war with an otherwise peaceful religion that has been "hijacked" by extremists. We are at war with precisely with vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslim in the Koran, and further elaborated in the literature of the hadith, which recounts the saying and actions of the Prophet. A future in which Islam and the West do not stand on the brink of mutual annihilation is a future in which most Muslims have learned to ignore most of their canon, just as most Christians have learned to do. Such a transformation is by no means guaranteed to occur, however, given the tenets of Islam. (109-110)

Many authors have pointed out that it is problematic to speak of Muslim "fundamentalism" because it suggests that there are large doctrinal differences between fundamentalist Muslims and the mainstream. The truth, however, is that most Muslims appear to be "fundamentalist" in the Western sense of the word – in that even "moderate" approaches to Islam generally consider the Koran to be the literal and inerrant word of the one true God. The difference between fundamentalists and moderates – and certainly the difference between all "extremists" and moderates – is the degree to which they see political and military action to be intrinsic to the practice of their faith. In any case, people who believe that Islam must inform every dimension of human existence, including politics and law, are now generally called not "fundamentalists" or "extremists" but, rather, "Islamists."

The world, from the point of view of Islam, is divided into the "House of Islam" and the "House of War," and this latter designation should indicate how many Muslims believe their difference with those who do not share their faith will be ultimately resolved. While there are undoubtedly some "moderate" Muslims who have decided to overlook the irrevocable militancy of their religion, Islam is undeniably a religion of conquest. The only future devout Muslims can envisage – *as Muslims* – is one in which all infidels have been converted to Islam, subjugated, or killed. The tenets of Islam simply do not admit of anything but a temporary sharing of power with the "enemies of God." (110)

While the Koran is more than sufficient to establish these themes, the literature of the hadith elaborates:

Jihad is your duty under any ruler, be he godly or wicked.

A single endeavor (of fighting) in Allah's Cause in the forenoon or in the afternoon is better than the world and whatever is in it.

A day and a night fighting on the frontier is better than a month of fasting and praying.

Nobody who dies and finds good from Allah (in the Hereafter) would wish to come back to this world even if he were given the whole world and whatever is in it, except the martyr who, on seeing the superiority of martyrdom, would like to come back to the world and

get killed again (in Allah's Cause).

He who dies without having taken part in a campaign dies in a kind of unbelief.

Paradise is in the shadow of swords. (112)

The imperative of world conquest is an interesting one, given that "imperialism" is one of the chief sins that Muslims attribute to the West. (113)

[Under Islamic rule, the Jews] have been forced to wear distinctive clothing (the yellow badge originated in Baghdad, not in Nazi Germany). (114)

Within the House of Islam, the penalty for learning too much about the world – so as to call the tenets of the faith into question – is death. If a twenty-first-century Muslim loses his faith, though he may have been a Muslim only for a single hour, the normative response, everywhere under Islam, is to kill him. (115)

We must not overlook the fact that a significant percentage of the world's Muslims believe that the men who brought down the World Trade Center are now seated at the right hand of God, amid "rivers of purest water, and rivers of milk forever fresh; rivers of wine delectable to those that drink it, and rivers of clearest honey" (47:15). these men – who slit the throats of stewardesses and delivered young couples with their children to their deaths at five hundred miles per hour – are at present being "attended by boys graced with eternal youth" in a "kingdom blissful and glorious." They are "arrayed in garments of fine green silk and rich brocade, and adorned with bracelets of silver" (76:15). the list of their perquisites is long. But what is it that gets a martyr out of bed early on his last day among the living? Did any of the nineteen hijackers make haste to Allah's garden simply to get his hands on his allotment of silk? It seem doubtful. The irony here is almost a miracle in its own right: the most sexually repressive people found in the world today – people who are stirred to a killing rage by reruns of *Baywatch* – are lured to martyrdom by a conception of paradise that resembles nothing so much as an al fresco bordello. (127)

There is little possibility of our having a *cold* war with an Islamist regime armed with long-range nuclear weapons. A cold war requires that the parties be mutually deterred by the threat of death. Notions of martyrdom and jihad run roughshod over the logic that allowed the United States and the Soviet Union to pass half a century perched, more or less stably, on the brink of Armageddon. (128-129)

Samuel Huntington has famously described the conflict between Islam and the West as a "clash of civilizations." Huntington observed that wherever Muslims and non-Muslims share a border, armed conflict tends to arise. Finding a felicitous phrase for an infelicitous fact, he declared that "Islam has bloody borders." (130)

Western leaders who insist that our conflict is not with Islam are mistaken; but, as I argue throughout this book, we have a problem with Christianity and Judaism as well. (131)

Zakaria and many others have noted that as repressive as Arab generally are, they tend to be more liberal than the people they oppress. The Saudi Prince Abdullah, for instance – a man who has by no means distinguished himself as a liberal – recently proposed that women should be permitted to drive automobiles in his country. As it turns out, his

greatly oppressed people would not stand for this degree of spiritual oppression, and the prince was forced to back down. (131-132)

This is a terrible truth that we have to face: the only thing that currently stands between us and the roiling ocean of Muslim unreason is a wall of tyranny and human rights abuses that we have helped to erect. (132)

The Arab world is now economically and intellectually stagnant to a degree that few could have thought possible, given its historical role in advancing and preserving human knowledge. In the year 2002 the GDP of all Arab countries combined did not equal that of Spain. Even more troubling, Spain translates as many books into Spanish each year as the entire Arab world has translated into Arabic since the ninth century. (132-133)

Although we have seen that the Bible is itself a great reservoir of intolerance, for Christians and Jews alike – as everything from the writings of Augustine to the present actions of Israeli settlers demonstrates – it is not difficult to find great swaths of the Good Book, as well as Christian and Jewish exegesis, that offer counterarguments. The Christian who wants to live in the full presence of rationality and modernity can keep the Jesus of Mathew sermonizing upon the mount and simply ignore the world-consuming rigmarole of Revelation. Islam appears to offer no such refuge for one who would live peacefully in a pluralistic world. (137-138)

It is time to admit that not all cultures are at the same stage of moral development. This is a radically impolitic thing to say, of course, but it seems as objectively true as saying that not all societies have equal material resources. We might even conceive of our moral differences in just these terms: not all societies have the same degree of *moral wealth*. Many things contribute to such an endowment. Political and economic stability, literacy, a modicum of social equality – where such things are lacking, people tend to find many compelling reasons to treat one another rather badly. (143)

To say of another culture that it lags a hundred and fifty years behind our own in social development is a terrible criticism indeed, given how far we've come in that time. Now imagine that benighted Americans of 1863 coming to possess chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. This is more or less the situation we confront in much of the developing world. (144)

Any systematic approach to ethics, or to understanding the necessary underpinnings of a civil society, will find many Muslims standing eye deep in the red barbarity of the fourteenth century. There are undoubtedly historical and cultural reasons for this, and enough blame to go around, but we should not ignore the fact that we must now confront whole societies whose moral and political development – in their treatment of women and children, in their prosecution of war, in their approach to criminal justice, and in their very intuitions about what constitutes cruelty – lags behind our own. This may seem like an unscientific and potentially racist thing to say, but it is neither. It is not in the least racist, since it is not at all likely that there are *biological* reasons for the disparities here, and it is unscientific only because science has not yet addressed the moral sphere in a systematic way. Come back in a hundred years, and if we haven't returned to living in caves and killing one another with clubs, we will have some scientifically astute things to say about ethics. Any honest witness to current events will realize that there is no moral equivalence between the kind of force civilized democracies

project in the world, warts and all, and the internecine violence that is perpetrated by Muslim militants, or indeed by Muslim governments. (145-146)

Think of all the good things human beings will not do in this world tomorrow because they believe that their most pressing task is to build another church or mosque, or to enforce some ancient dietary practice, or to print volumes upon volumes of exegesis on the disordered thinking of ignorant men. (149)

[...] even the most docile forms of Christianity currently present insuperable obstacles to AIDS prevention and family planning in the developing world, to medical research, and to the development of a rational drug policy – and these contributions to human misery alone constitute some of the most appalling failures of reasonableness in any age. (150)

What constitutes a civil society? At minimum, it is a place where ideas, of all kinds, can be criticized without the risk of physical violence. If you live in a land where certain things cannot be said about the king, or about an imaginary being, or about certain books, because such utterances carry the penalty of death, torture, or imprisonment, you do not live in a civil society. It appears that one of the most urgent tasks we now face in the developed world is to find some way of facilitating the emergence of civil societies everywhere else. Whether such societies have to be democratic is not at all clear. (150)

If a stable peace is ever to be achieved between Islam and the West, Islam must undergo a radical transformation. This transformation, to be palatable to Muslims, must also appear to come from Muslims themselves. It does not seem much of an exaggeration to say that the fate of civilization lies largely in the hands of “moderate” Muslims. Unless Muslims can reshape their religion into an ideology that is basically benign – or outgrow it altogether – it is difficult to see how Islam and the West can avoid falling into a continual state of war, and on innumerable fronts. (152)

## CHAPTER V WEST OF EDEN

Compared with the theocratic terrors of medieval Europe, or those that persist in much of the Muslim world, the influence of religion in the West now seems rather benign. We should not be misled by such comparisons, however. The degree to which religious ideas still determine government policies – especially those in the United States – presents a grave danger to everyone. It has been widely reported, for instance, that Ronald Reagan perceived the paroxysms in the Middle East through the lens of biblical prophecy. He went so far as to include men like Jerry Falwell and Hal Lindsey in his national security briefings. It should go without saying that theirs are not the sober minds one wants consulted about the deployment of nuclear weaponry. For many years U.S. Policy in the Middle East has been shaped, at least in part, by the interests that fundamentalist Christians have in the future of Jewish state. Christian “support for Israel” is, in fact, an example of religious cynicism so transcendental as to go almost unnoticed in our political discourse. Fundamentalist Christians support Israel because they believe that the final consolidation of Jewish power in the Holy Land – specifically, the rebuilding of Solomon's temple – will usher in both the Second Coming of Christ and the final destruction of the Jews. (153)

Contemporary examples of governmental piety are everywhere to be seen. Many

prominent Republicans belong to the Council for National Policy, a secretive Christian pressure group founded by the fundamentalist Tim LaHaye (coauthor of the apocalyptic "Left Behind" series of novels). This organization meets quarterly to discuss who knows what. George W. Bush gave a closed-door speech to the council in 1999, after which the Christian Right endorsed his candidacy. Indeed, 40 percent of those who eventually voted for Bush were white evangelicals. Beginning with his appointment of John Ashcroft as his attorney general, President Bush found no lack of occasions on which to return the favor. The department of Justice, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, and Education now regularly issue directives that blur the separation between church and state. In his "faith-based initiative" Bush has managed to funnel tens of millions of taxpayer dollars directly to church groups, to be used more or less however they see fit. One of his appointments to the Food and Drug Administration was Dr. W. David Hager, a pro-life obstetrician who has declared publicly that premarital sex is a sin and that any attempt to separate "Christian truth" and "secular truth" is "dangerous." Lieutenant General William G. Boykin was recently appointed deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence at the Pentagon. A highly decorated Special Forces officer, he now sets policy with respect to the search for Osama bin Laden, Mullah Omar, and the rest of America's enemies in hiding. He is also, as it turns out, an ardent opponent of Satan. Analyzing a photograph of Mogadishu after the fateful routing of his forces there in 1993, Boykin remarked that certain shadows in the image revealed "the principalities of darkness ... a demonic presence in that city that God revealed to me as the enemy." On the subject of the war on terror, he has asserted that our "enemy is a guy named Satan." While these remarks sparked some controversy in the media, most Americans probably took them in stride. After all, 65 percent of us are quite certain that Satan exists. (155-156)

Apparently feeling that it is impossible to say anything stupid while in the service of this worldview [Tom DeLay] attributed the shootings at the Columbine High School in Colorado to the fact that our schools teach the theory of evolution. (156)

In the United States, and in much of the rest of the world, it is currently illegal to seek certain experiences of pleasure. Seek pleasure by a forbidden means, even in the privacy of your own home, and men with guns may kick in the door and carry you away to prison for it. One of the most surprising things about this situation is how unsurprising most of us find it. As in most dreams, the very faculty of reason that would otherwise notice the strangeness of these events seems to have succumbed to sleep.

Behaviors like drug use, prostitution, sodomy, and viewing of obscene materials have been categorized as "victimless crimes." (158)

[...] we must ask ourselves, why would anyone want to punish people for engaging in behavior that brings no significant risk of harm to anyone? Indeed, what is startling about the notion of a victimless crime is that even when the behavior is question is genuinely victimless, its criminality is still affirmed by those who are eager to punish it. It is in such cases that the true genius lurking behind many of our laws stands revealed. The idea of a victimless crime is nothing more than a judicial reprise of the Christian notion of *sin*. (159)

It is no accident that people of faith often want to curtail the private freedoms of others. This impulse has less to do with the history of religion and more to do with its logic, because the very idea of privacy is incompatible with the existence of God. If God sees

and knows all things, and remains so provincial a creature as to be scandalized by certain sexual behaviors or states of the brain, then what people do in the privacy of their own homes, though it may not have the slightest implication for their behavior in public, will still be a matter of public concern for people of faith. (159)

When one looks at our drug laws – indeed, at our vice laws altogether – the only organizing principle that appears to make sense of them is that anything which might radically eclipse prayer or procreative sexuality as a source of pleasure has been outlawed. (160)

The fact that people are being prosecuted and imprisoned for using marijuana, while alcohol remains a staple commodity, is surely the *reductio ad absurdum* of any notion that our drug laws are designed to keep people from harming themselves or others. (161)

Under our current laws, it is safe to say, if a drug were invented that posed no risk of physical harm or addiction to its users but produced a brief feeling of spiritual bliss and epiphany in 100 percent of those who tried it, this drug would be illegal, and people would be punished mercilessly for its use. Only anxiety about the biblical crime of idolatry would appear to make sense of this retributive impulse. Because we are a people of faith, taught to concern ourselves with the sinfulness of our neighbors, we have grown tolerant of irrational uses of state power.

Our prohibition of certain substances has led thousands of otherwise productive and law-abiding men and women to be locked away for decades at a stretch, sometimes for life. Their children have become wards of the state. As if such cascading horror were not disturbing enough, *violent* criminals – murders, rapists, and child molesters – are regularly paroled to make room for them. (162)

Each year, over 1.5 million men and women are arrested in the United States because of our drug laws. At this moment, somewhere on the order of 400,000 men and women languish in U.S. Prisons for *nonviolent* drug offenses. One million others are currently on probation. More people are imprisoned for nonviolent drug offenses in the United States than are incarcerated, for any reason, in all of Western Europe (which has a larger population). The cost of these efforts, at the federal level alone, is nearly \$20 billion dollars annually. The total cost of our drug laws – when one factors in the expense to state and local governments and the tax revenue lost by our failure to regulate the sale of drugs – could easily be in excess of \$100 billion dollars each year. Our war on drugs consumes an estimated 50 percent of the trial time of our courts and the full-time energies of over 400,000 police officers. These are resources that might otherwise be used to fight violent crime and terrorism. (162-163)

It is well known, for instance, that the experiment with the prohibition of alcohol in the United States did little more than precipitate a terrible comedy of increased drinking, organized crime, and police corruption. What is not generally remembered is that prohibition was an explicitly religious exercise, being the joint product of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the pious lobbying of certain Protestant missionary societies. (163)

Faith drives a wedge between ethics and suffering. Where certain actions cause no suffering at all, religious dogmatists still maintain that they are evil and worthy of

punishment (sodomy, marijuana use, homosexuality, the killings of blastocysts, etc.). and yet, where suffering and death are found in abundance their causes are often deemed to be good (withholding funds for family planning in the third world, prosecuting nonviolent drug offenders, preventing stem-cell research, etc). This inversion of priorities not only victimizes innocent people and squanders scarce resources; it completely falsifies our ethics. It is time we found a more reasonable approach to answering questions about right and wrong. (168-169)

## CHAPTER VI A SCINECE OF GOOD AND EVIL

In the face of God's obvious inadequacies, the pious have generally held that one cannot apply earthly norms to the Creator of the universe. This argument loses its force the moment we notice that the Creator who purports to be beyond human judgment is consistently ruled by human passions – jealousy, wrath, suspicion, and the lust to dominate. A close study of our holy books reveals that the God of Abraham is ridiculous fellow – capricious, petulant, and cruel – and one with whom a covenant is little guarantee of health or happiness. If these are the characteristics of God, then the worst among us have been created far more in his imagine than we ever could have hoped. (173)

Cognitive chauvinism of this sort has not merely been a problem for animals. The doubt, on the part of Spanish explorers, about whether or not South American Indians had “souls” surely contributed to the callousness with which they treated them during their conquest of the New World. Admittedly, it is difficult to say just how far down the phylogenic tree our ethical responsibilities run. Our intuitions about the consciousness of other animals are driven by a variety of factors, many of which probably have no bearing upon whether or not they are conscious. For instance, creatures that lack facial expressiveness – or faces at all – are more difficult to include within the circle of our moral concern. It seems that until we more fully understand the relationship between brains and minds, our judgments about the possible scope of animal suffering will remain relatively blind and relatively dogmatic. (174-175)

When was the last time that someone was criticized for not “respecting” another person's unfounded beliefs about physics or history? The same rules should apply to ethical, spiritual, and religious beliefs as well. Credit goes to Christopher Hitchens for distilling, in a single phrase, a principle of discourse that could well arrest our slide toward the abyss: “what can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence.” Let us pray that billions of us soon agree with him. (176)

Rather than find real reasons for human solidarity, faith offers us a solidarity born of tribal and tribalizing fictions. [...] religion is one of the great limiters of moral identity, since most believers differentiate themselves, in moral terms, from those who do not share their faith. (176)

The general retort to relativism is simple, because most relativists contradict their thesis in the very act of stating it. Take the case of relativism with respect to morality: moral relativists generally believe that all cultural practices should be respected on their own terms, that the practitioners of the various barbarisms that persist around the globe cannot be judged by the standards of the West, nor can the people of the past be judged



by the standards of the present. And yet, implicit in this approach to morality lurks a claim that is not relative but absolute. Most moral relativists believe that tolerance of cultural diversity is better, in some important sense, than outright bigotry. This may be perfectly reasonable, or course, but it amounts to an overarching claim about how all human beings should live. Moral relativism, when used as a rationale for tolerance of diversity, is self-contradictory.

There is, however, a more sophisticated version of this line of thinking that is not so easily dispatched it generally goes by the name of "pragmatism." [...] The pragmatist's basic premise is that, try as we might, the currency of our ideas cannot be placed on the gold standard of correspondence with reality as it is. To call a statement "true" is merely to praise it for how it functions in some area of discourse; it is not to say anything about how it relates to the universe at large. From the point of view of pragmatism, the notion that our beliefs might "correspond with reality" is absurd. Beliefs are simply tools for making one's way in the world. Does a hammer correspond with reality? No. it has merely proven its usefulness for certain tasks. So it is, we are told, with the "truths" of biology, history, or any other field. For the pragmatists, the *utility* of a belief trumps all other concerns, even the concern for coherence. If a literalist reading the Bible works for you on Sunday, while agnosticism about God is better suited to Mondays at the office, there is no reason to worry about the resulting contradictions in your worldview. These are not so much incompatible claims about the way the world is as different styles of talking, each suited to a particular occasion. (179-180)

The fact that we must rely on certain intuitions to answer ethical questions does not in the least suggest that there is anything insubstantial, ambiguous, or culturally contingent about ethical truths. As in any other field, there will be room for intelligent dissent on questions of right and wrong, but intelligent dissent has its limits. People who believe that the earth is flat are not dissenting *geographers*; people who deny that the Holocaust ever occurred are not dissenting *historians*; people who think that God created the universe in 4004 BC are not dissenting *cosmologists*; and we will see that people who practice barbarism like "honor killing" are not dissenting *ethicists*. The fact that good ideas are intuitively cashed does not make bad ideas any more respectable. (184)

Strict reductionism does not seem to offer us much hope of insights into ethics. The same, of course, can be said of the most higher-level phenomena. Economic behavior necessarily supervenes upon the behavior of atoms, but we will not approach an understanding of economics through particle physics. Fields like game theory and evolutionary biology, for instance, have some plausible stories to tell about the roots of what is generally called "altruistic behavior" in the scientific literature, but we should not make too much of these stories. The finding that nature seems to have selected for our ethical intuitions is relevant only insofar as it gives the lie to the ubiquitous fallacy that these intuitions are somehow the product of religion. But nature has selected for many things that we would have done well to leave behind us in the jungles of Africa. The practice of rape may have once conferred an adaptive advantage on our species – and rapists of all shapes and sizes can indeed be found in the natural world (dolphins, orangutans, chimpanzees, etc.). does this mean that rape is any less objectionable in human society? Even if we concede that some number of rapes are inevitable, given how human beings are wired, how is this different from saying that some number of cancers are inevitable? We will strive to cure cancer in any case. (185)

Consider the practice of "honor killing" that persists throughout much of Africa, the Middle

East, and Southeast Asia. We live in a world in which women and girls are regularly murdered by their male relatives for perceived sexual indiscretions – ranging from merely speaking to a man without permission to falling victim of rape. Coverage of these atrocities in the Western media generally refers to them as a “tribal” practice, although they almost invariably occur in a Muslim context. Whether we call the beliefs that inspire this behavior “tribal” or “religious” is immaterial; the problem is clearly a product of what men in these societies believe about shame and honor, about the role of women, and about female sexuality. (187-188)

Given the requisite beliefs about “honor,” a man will be desperate to kill his daughter upon learning that she was raped. The same angel of compassion can be expected to visit her brothers as well. Such killings are not at all uncommon in places like Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan, Iraq, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. In these parts of the world, a girl of any age who gets raped has brought shame upon her family. Luckily, this shame is not indelible and can be readily expunged with her blood. The subsequent ritual is inevitably a low-tech affair, as none of these societies have devised a system for administering lethal injections for the crime of bringing shame upon one's family. The girl either has her throat cut, or she is doused with gasoline and set on fire, or she is shot. The jail sentences for these men, if they are prosecuted at all, are invariably short. Many considered heroes in their communities. (188-189)

What is love? Few of us will be tempted to consult a dictionary on the subject we know that we want those we love to be happy. We feel compassion for their suffering. When love is really effective – that is, really *felt*, rather than merely imagined – we cannot help sharing in the joy of those we love, and in their anguish as well. The disposition of love entails the loss, at least to some degree, of our utter self-absorption – and this is surely one of the clues as to why this state of mind is so pleasurable. Most of us will find that cutting a little girl's head off after she has been raped just doesn't capture these sentiments very well.

At this point, many anthropologists will want to argue for the importance of cultural context. These murderers are not murderers in the usual sense. They are ordinary, even loving gentlemen who have become the pawns of tribal custom. Taken to its logical conclusion, this view suggests that any behavior is compatible with any mental state. Perhaps there is a culture in which you are expected to flay your firstborn child alive as an expression of “love.” But unless everyone in such a culture wants to be flayed alive, this behavior is simply incompatible with love as we know it. The Golden Rule really does capture many of our intuitions here. We treat those we love more or less the way we would like to be treated ourselves. Honor killers do not seem to be in the habit of asking others to drench them in gasoline and immolate them in turn.

Any culture that raises men and boys to kill unlucky girls, rather than comfort them, is a culture that has managed to retard the growth of love. Such societies, of course, regularly fail to teach their inhabitants many other things – like how to read. Not learning how to read is not another *style* of literacy, and not learning to see others as ends in themselves is not another style of ethics. It is a *failure* of ethics. (189-190)

Children born without a functioning copy of the gene that produces the enzyme hypoxanthine-guanine phosphoribosyltransferase will have a constellation of ailments and incapacities known as Lesch-Nyhan syndrome. They will also compulsively mutilate themselves, possibly as a result of the build-up of uric acid in their tissues. If left unrestrained, such children helplessly gnaw their lips and fingers and even thrust pointed

objects into their eyes. (191)

To learn that one's grandfather flew a bombing mission over Dresden in the Second World War is one thing; to hear that he killed five little girls and their mother with a shovel is another. We can be sure that he would have killed more women and girls by dropping bombs from pristine heights, and they are likely to have died equally horrible deaths, but his culpability would not appear the same. Indeed, we seem to know, intuitively, that it would take a different kind of person to perpetrate violence of the latter sort. And, as we might expect, the psychological effects of participating in these types of violence are generally distinct. Consider the following account of a Soviet soldier in Afghanistan: "It's frightening and unpleasant to have to kill, you think, but you soon realize that what you really find objectionable is shooting someone point-blank. Killing *en masse*, in a group, is exciting, even – and I've seen this myself – fun." This is not to say that no one has ever enjoyed killing people up close; it is just that we all recognize that such enjoyment requires an unusual degree of callousness to the suffering of others. (195)

Gandhi was undoubtedly the twentieth century's most influential pacifist. The success he enjoyed in forcing the British Empire to withdraw from the Indian subcontinent brought pacifism down from the ethers of religious precept and gave it new political relevance. Pacifism in this form no doubt required considerable bravery from its practitioners and constituted a direct confrontation with injustice. [...] it is clear, however, that Gandhi's nonviolence can be applied to only a limited range of human conflict. We would do well to reflect on Gandhi's remedy for the holocaust: he believed that the Jews should have committed mass suicide, because this "would have aroused the world and the people of German to Hitler's violence." We might wonder what a world full of pacifists would have done once it had grown "aroused" – commit suicide as well? [...] here we come upon a terrible facet of ethically asymmetric warfare: when your enemy has no scruples, your own scruples become another weapon in his hand. (202)

## CHAPTER VII EXPERIMENTS IN CONSCIOUSNESS

While many of us go for decades without experiencing a full day of solitude, we live every moment in the solitude of our own minds. However close we may be to others, our pleasures and pains are ours alone. Spiritual practice is often recommended as the most rational response to this situation. The underlying claim here is that we can realize something about the nature of consciousness in this moment that will improve our lives. The experience of countless contemplatives suggests that consciousness – being merely the condition in which thought, emotion, and even our senses of self arises – is never actually changed by what it knows. That which is aware of joy does not become joyful; that which is aware of sadness does not become sad. From the point of view of consciousness, we are merely aware *of* sights, sounds, sensations, moods, and thoughts. Many spiritual teachings allege that if we can recognize our identity as consciousness itself, as the mere witness of appearances, we will realize that we stand perpetually free of the vicissitudes of experience. (206)

Like Descartes, most of us begin these inquiries as *thinkers*, condemned by the terms of our subjectivity to maneuver in a world that appears to be other than what we are. Descartes accentuated this dichotomy by declaring that two substances were to be found

in God's universe: matter and spirit. For most of us, a dualism of this sort is more or less a matter of common sense (though the term "spirit" seems rather majestic, given how our minds generally comport themselves). As science has turned its reifying light upon the mysteries of the human mind, however, Descartes' dualism (along with our own "folk psychology") has come in for some rough treatment. Bolstered by the undeniable success of three centuries of purely physical research, many philosophers and scientists now reject Descartes' separation of mind and body, spirit and matter, as the concession to Christian piety that surely was, and imagine that they have thereby erased the conceptual gulf between consciousness and the physical world. (207-208)

Inevitably, scientists treat consciousness as a mere *attribute* of certain large-brained animals. The problem, however, is that nothing about a brain, when surveyed as a physical system, declares it to be a bearer of that peculiar, interior dimension that each of us experiences as consciousness in his own case. (208)

The sense of self seems to be the product of the brain's representing its own acts of representation; its seeing of the world begets an image of a *one who sees*. It is important to realize that this feeling – the sense that each of us has of *appropriating*, rather than merely *being*, a sphere of experience – is not a necessary feature of consciousness. It is, after all, conceivable that a creature could form a representation of the world without forming a representation of *itself* in the world. (212)

As a mental phenomenon, loss of self is not as rare as our scholarly neglect of it suggests. This experience is characterized by a sudden loss of subject/object perception: the continuum of experience remains, but one no longer feels that there is a knower standing apart from the known. Thoughts may arise, but the feeling that one is the thinker of these thoughts has vanished. (213)

The contents of consciousness – sights, sounds, sensations, thoughts, moods, etc. – whatever they are at the level of the brain, are merely *expressions* of consciousness at the level of our experience. Unrecognized as such, many of these appearances seem to impinge upon consciousness from without, and the sense of self emerges, and grows entrenched, as the feeling that *that which knows* is circumscribed, modified, and often oppressed by *that which is known*. (213)

Most techniques of introspection that aim at uncovering the intrinsic properties of consciousness are referred to as methods of meditation. To be told that a person is "meditating," however, is to be given almost no information at all about the content of his experience. "Meditation," in the sense that I use it here, refers to any means whereby our sense of "self" – of subject/object dualism in perception and cognition – can be made to vanish, while consciousness remains vividly aware of the continuum of experience. Inevitably, the primary obstacle to meditation is *thinking*. This leads many people to assume that the goal of meditation is to produce a thought-free state. It is true that some experiences entail the temporary cessation of thought, but meditation is less a matter of suppressing thoughts than of breaking our identification with them, so that we can recognize the condition in which thoughts themselves arise. Western scientists and philosophers generally imagine that thinking is the epitome of conscious life and would no sooner have a mind without thoughts than hands without fingers. The fundamental insight of most Eastern schools of spirituality, however, is that while thinking is a practical necessity, the failure to recognize thoughts *as thoughts*, moment after moment,

is what gives each of us the feeling that we call "I," and this is the string upon which all our states of suffering and dissatisfaction are strung. This is an empirical claim, not a matter of philosophical speculation. Break the spell of thought, and the duality of subject and object will vanish – as will the fundamental difference between conventional states of happiness and suffering. This is a fact about the mind that few Western scholars have ever made it their business to understand. (217-218)

A vast literature on meditation suggests that negative social emotions such as hatred, envy, and spite both proceed from and ramify our dualistic perception of the world. Emotions such as love and compassion, on the other hand, seem to make our minds very pliable in meditative terms, and it is increasingly easy to concentrate under their influence. (219)

Mysticism is a rational enterprise. Religion is not. The mystic has recognized something about the nature of consciousness prior to thought, and this recognition is susceptible to rational discussion. The mystic has reasons for what he believes, and these reasons are empirical. The roiling mystery of the world can be analyzed with concepts (this is science), or it can be experience free of concepts (this is mysticism). Religion is nothing more than bad concepts held in place of good ones for all time. It is the denial – at once full of hope and full of fear – of the vastitude of human ignorance. (221)

## EPILOGUE

What could possibly cause billions of human being to reconsider their religious beliefs? And yet, it is obvious that an utter revolution in our thinking could be accomplished in a single generation: if parents and teachers would merely give honest answers to the questions of every child. Our doubts about the feasibility of such a project should be tempered by an understanding of its necessity, for there is no reason whatsoever to think that we can survive our religious differences indefinitely. (224)

Religious violence is still with us because our religions are *intrinsically* hostile to one another. Where they appear otherwise, it is because secular knowledge and secular interests are restraining the most lethal improprieties of faith. It is time we acknowledged that no real foundation exists within the canons of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or any of our other faiths for religious tolerance and religious diversity. (225)

## NOTES

### Chapter 1

As Lewis, *Crisis of Islam*, notes, we have caused far more chaos in Central America, Southeast Asia, and southern Africa. Those Muslim countries which have been occupied by foreign powers (like Egypt) are in many ways much better off than countries (like Saudi Arabia) which have not. Taking Saudi Arabia as an example, despite its relative wealth – which is due to nothing more than an accident of nature – this country lags behind its neighbors in many respects. The Saudis have only eight universities to serve 21 million people, and they did not abolish slavery until 1962. P. Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, also points out that most of our conflicts of recent years have been fought in *defense* of various Muslim populations; the first Gulf War was fought in defense of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and was followed by a decade of air protection for the Iraqi Kurds in the north and the Iraqi Shia in the south; the intervention in Somalia was designed to

relieve famine there; and our intervention in the Balkans was for the purpose of defending Bosnians and Kosovans from marauding Christian Serbs. Our original support of the mujaheddin in Afghanistan belongs in this category as well. As Berman says, "in all the recent history, no country on earth has fought so hard and consistently as the United States on behalf of Muslim Populations." This is true. And yet the Muslim world-view is such that this fact, if acknowledged at all, is generally counted as a further grievance against us; it is yet another source of Muslim "humiliation." (230-231)

'[I]n 1994, at a village south of Islamabad, police charged a doctor with setting fire to the sacred Koran, a blasphemous crime punishable by death. Before he could be tried, an enraged mob dragged him from the police station, doused him with kerosene, and burned him alive." (231)

## Chapter 2

There are ways of constructing the concept of "belief" that make it appear equally disjoint. If we use the term too loosely, it can seem that the entire brain is intimately involved in "belief" formation. Imagine, for instance, that a man has come to your door claiming to represent the "Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes":

1. You see the man's face, recognize it, and therefore "believe" that you know who this person is. Activity in your fusiform cortex, especially in the right hemisphere, is crucial for such recognition to occur, and a lesion here will lead to *prosopagnosia* (the inability to recognize faces, or indeed to see faces as *faces* at all). Using "belief" in this context, it is tempting to say that prosopagnosics have lost certain "beliefs" about what other people look like.

2. Having recognized the man's face, you form the "belief," based on your long-term memory for both faces and facts that he is Ed McMahon, the famous spokesman for Publishers Clearing House. Damage to your perirhinal and perihippocampal cortices would have prevented this "belief" from forming. [...]

3. Not yet being sure whether this is a hoax of some sort (perhaps Mr. McMahon is now working for *Candid Camera*) you take another moment to study the man at your door. You form the "belief," based on his tone of voice, the look in his eye, and many other factors, that he is trustworthy and therefore means what he says. Your ability to form such judgments reliably – in particular, your ability to detect *untrustworthiness* – requires that you have at least one functioning amygdala [...] a small, almond-shaped nucleus in your medial temporal lobe.

4. Mr. McMahon then informs you that you are the lucky winner of a "big jackpot." Your memory for words (requiring different processing from your memory for faces) leads you to "believe" that you have won some money, rather than a "pot" of some sort. Making sense of this phrase will require the working of your superior and middle temporal gyri, predominantly in your left hemisphere. [...]

5. Ed then produces a piece of paper, which he invites you to read. He does this by pointing. Your "belief" that he wants you to read requires what has come to be called "theory of mind" processing on your part [...]. the anatomy underlying theory of mind processing is not entirely clear at present, but it seems that the anterior cingulate cortex as well as regions of the frontal and temporal lobes enable you to attribute mental states (including beliefs) to others. [...]

6. Scanning the paper with your eyes, you see the following symbols appended after your name: \$10,000,000. Some processing relative to Arabic numerals (probably in your left parietal lobe [...]) leads you to "believe" that this paper is actually a check for ten million dollars.

While many diverse streams of neural activity have conspired to make you believe that you have won a terrific sum of money, it is *this* idea – explicitly represented in language – that underwrites the sweeping changes that will take place in your nervous system, and in your life. Perhaps you will startle the benevolent Mr. McMahon by shrieking; you may even burst into tears; it is only a matter of hours before you begin shopping with an unusual degree of abandon. Your belief that you have just won ten million dollars will be the author of all these actions, both voluntary and involuntary. In particular, it will dictate the following behavior: to the question "Have you just won ten million dollars?" you will – if moved by the spirit of candor – reply yes. (234-236)

### Chapter 3

"Anti-Semitism," like the term "Aryan," is a misnomer of nineteenth-century German pseudo-science. *Semitic* (derived from *Shem*, one of Noah's three sons) "designed a group of cognate languages that included Hebrew, Arabic, Aramaic, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Ethiopic, not an ethnic or racial group." [...] "Anti-Semitism" should therefore denote a hatred of Arabs as well, which it does not. Despite its mistaken roots, "anti-Semitism" has become the only acceptable term for the hatred of Jews. (246)

It has grown fashionable to assert that the true horror of the Holocaust, apart from its scale, was that it was an expression of *reason*, and that it therefore demonstrates a pathology inherent to the Western Enlightenment tradition. The truth of this assertion is held by many scholars to be self-evident – for no one can deny that technology, bureaucracy, and systematic managerial thinking made the genocidal ambitions of the Third Reich possible. The romantic thesis lurking here is that reason itself has a "shadow side" and is therefore no place to turn for the safeguarding of human happiness. This is a terrible misunderstanding of the situation, however. The Holocaust marked the culmination of German tribalism and two thousand years of Christian fulminating against the Jews. Reason had nothing to do with it. Put a telescope in the hands of a chimpanzee, and if he bashes his neighbor over the head with it, reason's "shadow side" will have been equally revealed. (249)

### Chapter 4

Christopher Luxenberg (this is a pseudonym), a scholar of ancient Semitic languages, has recently argued that a mistranslation is responsible for furnishing the Muslim paradise with "virgins" (Arabic *hur*, transliterated as "houris" – literally "white ones"). It seems that the passages describing paradise in the Koran were drawn from earlier Christian texts that make frequent use of the Aramaic word *hur*, meaning "white raisins." White raisins, it seems, were a great delicacy in the ancient world. Imagine the look on a young martyr's face when, finding himself in a paradise teeming with his fellow thugs, his seventy houris arrive as a fistful of raisins. (253)

It would be impossible to do justice to the richness of the Muslim imagination in the context of this book. To take only one preposterous example: it seems that many Iraqis believe that the widespread looting that occurred after the fall of Saddam's regime was orchestrated by Americans and Israelis, as part of a Zionist plot. The attacks upon American soldiers were carried out by CIA agents "as part of a covert operation to justify

prolonging the U.S. Military occupation." Wow! (254)

## Chapter 5

One of the concerns with giving federal funds to religious organizations is that these organizations are not bound by the same equal employment opportunity regulations that apply to the rest of the nonprofit world. Church groups can ban homosexuals, people who have divorced and remarried, those who have married interracially, etc., and still receive federal funds. They can also find creative ways to use these funds to proselytize. Granting such funds in the first place puts the federal government in the position of deciding what is, and what isn't, a genuine religion – a responsibility that seems fraught with problems of its own. (256-257)

Viewing the drug problem from the perspective of health care is instructive: our laws against providing addicts with clean needles have increased the spread of AIDS, hepatitis C, and other blood-borne diseases. Since the purity of dosage of illegal drugs remains a matter of guesswork for the user, the rates of poisoning and overdose from drug use are unnecessarily high (as they were for alcohol during Prohibition). Perversely, the criminal prohibition of drugs has actually made it easier for minors to get them, because the market for them has been driven underground. The laws limiting the medical use of opiate painkillers do little more than keep the terminally ill suffering unnecessarily during their last months of life. (257-258)

Some 51 percent of all violent offenders are released from jail after serving two years or less, and 76 percent were released after serving four years or less ([www.lp.org](http://www.lp.org)). At the federal level, the average sentence for a drug offense in the U.S. is 6 ¼ years. (258)

And yet, this mountain of imponderables reaches higher still. In many states, a person who has been merely *accused* of a drug crime can have his property seized, and those who informed against him can be rewarded with up to 25 percent of its value. The rest of these spoils go to police departments, which now rely upon such property seizures to meet their budgets. This is precisely the arrangement of incentives that led to this sort of corruption during the Inquisition (if one can even speak of such a process being "corrupted"). Like the heretic, the accused drug offender has no hope but to trade information for a reduced sentence. The person who can't (or won't) implicate others inevitably faces punishments of fantastical severity. Information has grown so valuable, in fact, that a black market for it has emerged. Defendants who have no information to trade can actually buy drug leads from professional informers (and they do not come cheap). The net result of all this is that police departments have learned to target property rather than crime. Property can be seized and forfeited even if a defendant is ultimately found innocent of any criminal offense. One national survey found that 80 percent of property seizures occur without any criminal prosecution whatsoever ([www.drugwarfacts.com](http://www.drugwarfacts.com)). Under these enlightened laws, couples in their eighties have permanently lost their homes because a grandchild was caught with marijuana. [...]

The war on drugs has clearly done much to erode our civil liberties. In particular, the standards for search and seizure, pretrial release, and judicial discretion in sentencing have all been revised in an attempt to make this unwinnable war easier to prosecute. Since drug offenses are covered by local, state, and federal jurisdictions, people can be tried multiple times for the same crime – some have been found not guilty at one level, only to receive life sentences upon subsequent prosecution. On more than one occasion, members of Congress have introduced legislation seeking to apply the



death penalty to anyone caught selling drugs. Unsurprisingly, our attempts to eradicate the supply of drugs in other countries have been even more detrimental to the liberties of others. In Latin America, we have become a tireless benefactor of human right violations. [...]

In environmental terms, the war on drugs has been no more auspicious. The aerial spraying of herbicides has hastened the destruction of the rainforest as well as contaminated water supplies, staple crops, and people. The U.S. Government has recently sought approval to use a genetically engineered "killer fungus," designed to attack marijuana crops domestically and coca and opium plants abroad. For the moment, some rather obvious environmental concerns have prevented its use. (258-259)

The war on drugs has also become a great engine of racial inequity, for while blacks constitute only 12 percent of the U.S. Population and 13 percent of U.S. Drug users, 38 percent of those arrested and 59 percent of those convicted for drug crimes are black. Our drug laws have contributed to the epidemic of fatherlessness in the black community, and this – along with the profits and resultant criminality of the drug trade – has devastated our inner cities. (259)

When was the last time someone was killed over an alcohol or tobacco deal gone awry? We can be confident that the same normalcy would be achieved if drugs were regulated by the government. At the inception of the modern "war on drugs," the economist Milton Friedman observed that "legalizing drugs would simultaneously reduce the amount of crime and raise the quality of law enforcement." He then invited the reader to "conceive of any other measure that would accomplish so much to promote law and order" [...]. what was true then remains true after three decades of pious misrule; the criminality associated with the drug trade is the inescapable consequence of our drug laws themselves. (259-260)

## Chapter 6

The role of Christian dogma in turning sexual neurosis into a principle of cultural oppression needs hardly be elaborated upon. Perhaps the most shocking disclosures in recent years (coming amid thousands of reports about pedophile priests in the United States) were those that surrounded a group of nuns that ran orphanages throughout Ireland during the 1950s and 1960s. The incongruously named Sisters of Mercy tortured children as young as eleven months (flogging and scalding them, as well as subjecting them to astonishing acts of psychological cruelty) for "the sins of their parents" (i.e., the sins of their own illegitimacy). In the service of ancient ideas about female sexuality, original sin, virgin births, etc., thousands of these infants were forcibly removed from the care of their unwed mothers and sent overseas for adoption. (274)

I suspect that if our media did not censor the more disturbing images of war, our moral sentiments would receive a correction on two fronts: first, we would be more motivated by the horrors visited upon us by our enemies; seeing Daniel Pearl decapitated, for instance, would have surely provoked a level of national outrage that did not arise in the absence of such imagery. Second, if we did not conceal the horrible reality of collateral damage from ourselves, we would be far less likely to support the dropping of "dumb" bombs, or even "smart" ones. While our newspapers and newscasts would be horrible to look at, I believe we would feel both greater urgency and greater restraint in our war on terrorism. (276-277)