The Future of an Illusion: Superstition and Idolatory

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COMMON TO MUCH Enlightenment and nineteenth-century liberal thought was a belief that, as people became better educated and more affluent, so too would there be a corresponding decline of religious beliefs. This was central to the view of those two quintessential ‘modern’ thinkers, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, who spoke respectively of ‘the opium of the people’ and of ‘the future of an illusion’. Marx’s views expressed those of large numbers of nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics: ‘Religion is the sigh of the creature overwhelmed by misfortune, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.’ Today many sociologists write as if the old fears and/or promises that God is dead were a description of social reality for most people. This secular triumphalism seems to me badly misplaced, except in a relatively few Western countries.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it appears that religious beliefs have lasted rather better than the ideas — some would claim themselves theological — of either Marx or Freud. Freud’s eschatology, in particular, has remarkable similarities to the dominant myths of Judaeo-Christianity, with the Oedipus complex playing the role of Original Sin in psychoanalytic theory, as Martin Wain has pointed out.

Except in a few countries, the Catholic Church has outlived its sworn enemy, the international communist movement, while fundamentalist Protestantism, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism seem to be on the rise in most parts of the world. (The last battle between communism and Christianity may well be the battle to unify Korea, with many South Korean Christians seeing unification as an opportunity for large-scale missionary activity.) While it is probably true that fundamentalism is often an expression of hostility towards various manifestations of ‘modernity’ and ‘Westernisation’, it is also the case that the religious element is far more resilient than most thinkers would have prophesised a century ago.

It is worth noting that, according to figures collected by Time magazine in 2001, Christianity remains the most widespread religion in the current world, with an estimated 1.9 billion adherents in 2000, three-quarters of them Catholic. There are an estimated 1.2 billion Muslims, 800 million Hindus and 360 million Buddhists, with much smaller numbers of Sikhs and Jews. These figures omit the vast array of religious beliefs that persist outside the hegemonic religions, or, increasingly, coexist with Christianity and Islam in many parts of the poor world. Both Islam and those classified as ‘non-religious’ are listed as the fastest growing groups, and Confucianism is not mentioned, a reflection perhaps of confusion as to whether it is better understood as a religious or ethical system. In the contemporary world, Christianity and Islam stand apart as the two major proselytising religions, and the only ones whose adherents are genuinely global and not concentrated among one or two particular countries or ethnic groups. Where they collide — as in Lebanon, the former Yugoslavia and parts of India and Indonesia — the consequences are not infrequently bloody.

In the contemporary world, the most common examples of violence and persecution linked to religion seem to come from the Islamic world, though even to assert this is to risk giving political offence. Indeed, the more that Western governments, led by the US, try to rally support against religious-based terrorism, the more they feel obliged to deny the link, to depict those terrorists who claim support from their religious convictions as somehow false believers.

Yet one can deplore attacks on individuals because they appear to hold particular beliefs while retaining the intellectual right to criticise the logic of those beliefs. It is hardly controversial today to point to the extent to which large-scale murder was justified as part of the imperial European expansion into the rest of the world through appeals to the Christian mission. Priests and missionaries were often the frontrunners of the imperialist venture, and apologists for the worst sort of barbarity. Islam hardly has a monopoly on links to violence and intolerance — consider the ravages of fundamentalist Hindus, Christians and Jews — but, in this particular moment of world history, there are probably more Muslims who turn to religion to justify attacks on their opponents than practitioners of any other religion. At the same time, we should not forget the recent slaughter of Muslims by Christian Serbs in Bosnia, or by Hindus in Gujarat, or the role of Christians, including priests and nuns, in interethnic slaughter in Rwanda. Most fundamentalist believers are willing to condone violence when directed against those they regard as sufficiently sinful, and Christianity has a long history of extraordinary barbarism.

I WANT TO ASK TWO QUESTIONS, beginning with this apparent persistence of religion despite huge rises in affluence and education. This is an historical and sociological question, but it overlaps with a more profoundly personal and philosophic one, namely, how can people who appear to agree on much in the social and political sphere disagree profoundly about the basis for their beliefs? There are many people whose commitment to social justice stems from deep-seated religious beliefs, but there are equally many, of whom I am one, who share such commitments without any...
religious foundation or with an instinctive antipathy to all forms of organised religion.

That such divisions exist is not always apparent. In most Western societies, religious beliefs are often not discussed, and many societies maintain something of a taboo against asking about people’s faiths, which are generally held to be a private matter. Yet their faith is nonetheless crucial in determining their views on some of the most contentious issues. While I do not hold any particular religious beliefs, I am certain that the hold of religion on human minds is consistently and constantly underestimated by most Western intellectuals, even by those who themselves profess some form of faith. In modern societies, it appears reactionary to claim that religion must influence political action, and hence that only bigots might question the relevance of John F. Kennedy’s Catholicism, Jimmy Carter’s born-again Protestantism or Tony Blair’s Anglicanism to their political positions. Yet to deny the relevance of religious beliefs is to trivialise them, and religious convictions underlie political positions to a greater extent than is often acknowledged.

Recently, there have been a number of attempts to explain the hold of religion through the use of cognitive psychology. Freud identified the strength of religious belief as grounded in ‘the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind’. One need not subscribe to the particular explanations of anthropology and meta-history to find sense in Freud’s basic understanding of the hold of religion as grounded in ‘fictions’ (his term) which we need to believe in to make sense of the world and to maintain ‘the regulations of civilisation’. The great majority of people grow up with a particular religious belief and attach themselves uncritically to it, much as we do with national identity. And, like patriotism, religious attachments carry their own dangers of becoming self-serving justification for prejudice and oppression.


I have deliberately refrained from defining ‘religion’ up to this point, because even its definition is fraught with disagreement. For most of human history, it is difficult to separate ‘religious’ from ‘cultural’ beliefs, and in some ways this remains true even in the most secular communities — say Fitzroy or Paddington. Bruce Lincoln points out that religion encompasses discourse, practice, community and institution, and often they conflict, as in the case of millions of church-going Catholics (and some of their priests) who ignore their Church’s teachings on contraception. In general, I understand ‘religion’ to mean a system of beliefs based on some form of transcendental power or spirit, usually defined as supernatural, which somehow determines our fate. Not all religious belief need find expression through organised forms of worship, though in practice much of my concern is with the major institutional expressions of religion, which for convenience I refer to as ‘the church’, a term which should be understood as encompassing in this sense synagogue, mosque and temple.

A frequent comment of people when challenged by the excesses of the church is to claim that their beliefs are not reflected by the institutions that claim to maintain them. Certainly, it is possible to hold a set of religious beliefs while rejecting any organised church, certainly without accepting the leadership of any form of priestly hierarchy. Of Abraham Lincoln, his wife observed that he never joined a church, but ‘he was a religious man by nature … it was a kind of poetry in his nature’. Others find identity and community in religion without necessarily believing in most of its teachings, as is true for many Jews who celebrate Passover, and for some Unitarians and Episcopalians. The Church of England is currently bitterly split between those who cling to established faith, and those who have called into question teachings as basic as the divinity of Christ. In Western countries, at least, it is not difficult to find people who attend religious services for comfort and company, but who do not subscribe to the bulk of their church’s teachings.

Yet such a decoupling of belief from observance is true of only a small number of people. For the great majority, religious belief is linked to membership of, or allegiance to, particular
institutions, however critical they are of them. As Gary Wills, who has emerged as spokesman for many American Catholics deeply disillusioned with the current Pope and bishops, wrote: ‘A person who loves the Church can have a lover’s quarrel with its leadership.’ Wills’s view is echoed by Muslims such as Ziauddin Sardar who call for a ‘reasoned struggle’ to rethink Islam and rescue it from its ossified prejudices and intolerance. Interestingly, both Wills and Sardar insist on the democratic roots of their religions, and call for a return to these origins.

There are others who reject organised religion but assert a human need for ‘the spiritual’, which is so vague a term as to cover everything from a belief in ‘nature’ (e.g. the worship of Gaia) to an appeal to essentialist notions of gender, as in reaching ‘the inner wo/man’ through witchcraft or the sort of kitsch invocation of maleness associated with Iron John. Claims that we need to reassert our spiritual side are often no more than unthought-through critiques of modern consumerism, or a desire to escape the tedium of everyday life by inventing non-orthodox forms of ritual and ceremony.

My own views are that almost all religious beliefs rest upon a set of myths and stories that are as likely or unlikely to be ‘true’ as is the world conjured up by other storytellers. Australian Aboriginal tales of the Dreaming seem to me equally unlikely an explanation of human origins as do the seven days of the book of Genesis, and attempts to reconcile religious teachings with either modern scientific knowledge or the evidence of human brutality seem to me preposterous, as a long line of sceptics have argued. Nor do I understand why people who argue for the existence of all powerful God/s seem to assume they require worship, often including either literal or symbolic sacrifice: there is a strange logic in arguing both for an omnipotent God and simultaneously believing s/he requires humans to follow intricate and sometimes demeaning practices of obeisance. But it is not my aim here to explore the plausibility of religious beliefs, but rather how these beliefs impact on the larger world.

RELIGIOUS BELIEF TOO OFTEN becomes a way of dividing the world into forces of good and evil, and turning these divisions into justifications for war and violence. It is hardly an original thought to posit that men — and it was largely men — invented God to justify slaughtering other men, nor is it likely that human history would have been noticeably more peaceful in the absence of religious beliefs. Nonetheless, the role of religion in perpetuating and barbarising conflict is remarkable. In the past fifty years, religious-based conflict has underlain the slaughter of millions in the partition of India and Pakistan, in the break-up of Yugoslavia and in the continuing conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians. What is most striking is the absence of examples where religion has prevented or even ameliorated wars and mass violence, although there are of course numerous examples of individuals who have sought to do this based on deep religious convictions. Religious leaders are far more likely to be on the front-lines blessing their troops than found seeking to prevent war in the first place.

Too many people have been killed in the name of religion to deny the possibility of a causal relationship between ‘faith’ and violence. The constant attempts to draw distinction between Islamic fundamentalism and ‘moderate’ Islam ignores the more difficult question as to whether deep religious faith of all sorts contains the potential to lead to intolerance and violence. Just to pose that question can lead to threats, sometimes attacks, as novelists such as Salman Rushdie and Michel Houellebecq discovered when they were perceived as ‘blaspheming’ Islam. While Rushdie was threatened with death, and was forced into hiding for many years, Houellebecq was prosecuted under French laws for inciting hatred, and found innocent.

It is not surprising that these examples come from contemporary Islam. Islam was at its most tolerant in the period when it was part of a thriving and rich cultural world, far more so than the Christianity that replaced it as it retreated from areas such as southern Spain. The fact that Islam is today the dominant religion of so many undemocratic and often poor parts of the world, and that it appeals precisely to those who would blame Western values and states for their disadvantaged position in the global order, cannot be denied by pious statements about the common ground shared by all true believers. Most important is the extent to which Islam is integrated into the official teachings of the state in ways that are no longer true of Christian societies. Even in those countries where there is no provision for other religious practices, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, the pressure from devout Muslims to break down the distinction between civil and religious life is far greater than in Western Christian countries, although there is an echo of this agenda in that of the Christian right in the US, of Hindu nationalists in India and of orthodox Jews in Israel.

But there are other examples. The most orthodox Jews in Israel are exempt from compulsory military service, and their schools are heavily supported by the state, which accepts their Talmudic-based curriculum. Israeli law has no provision for civil marriage or divorce, and public transport is closed on the Sabbath. Ironically, the imposition of the tenets of orthodox Judaism on Israel is one of the reasons it is so attractive to American fundamentalists, many of whom are

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historically profoundly anti-Semitic. Deeply religious Israelis are on the front-lines of Jewish settlements on the West Bank, and largely supportive of extreme military measures to defend these settlements.

The example of Israel underscores the fact that the link between faith and violence is not only relevant to Islam. It is not Islam per se but rather the larger social and political environments within which most Muslims live that makes it appear particularly literalist and repressive. There is no evidence that Bosnian Muslims were noticeably more intolerant or chauvinistic than their Serb or Croat neighbours, and some of the worst excesses of Islamic régimes, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan, are products of tribal traditions that do not exist in other Islamic societies, for example in South-East Asia.

The history of most major religions suggests that there is an uneasy relationship between religious fervour and violence. Some would claim that this is least true of Buddhism, which has a particular appeal to many in secular Western societies who see it as inherently more tolerant and harmonious than the major monotheistic religions. I am somewhat sceptical of this claim: the long Buddhist heritage of Cambodia did not prevent large numbers of Khmers participating in mass murder during the Pol Pot régime. In the same way, the Hinduism that inspired Gandhi also provides the justification for the caste system and a growing intolerance of other religions.

There is certainly evidence to suggest that a large number of terrorist groups in the contemporary world are inspired by and linked to particular religious teachings, even if the great majority of mainstream religious figures disavow them. According to people such as Houellebecq, this is particularly true of monotheistic religions, although it’s hard to see much difference in this case between, say, right-wing Hindu, Christian and Muslim fundamentalists. Judaism seems to exempt by not being a proselytising religion, although the excesses of right-wing Israeli governments in the occupied territories are too frequently justified in the name of protecting a religiously defined Jewish land, where the Bible is referred to as an authoritative guide, and where the settlers are almost always deeply orthodox, and often US immigrants.

This is not to assert, of course, that the certainty and moral absolutism that underlies so much mass violence need depend upon religious precepts. Indeed, the worst totalitarian leaders — Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot — have wreaked havoc in the name of an absolutism that persecuted religious organisations and believers. In the past century’s sagas of evil, the worst sins have been linked to movements that created their own cults around absolute leaders, although many extremely nasty governments — Franco’s Spain, or the current royal family of Saudi Arabia — were based on a complicity between church and state in the maintenance of a repressive order. It could be argued that religion can act as a restraint on the worst despots, but the historical record suggests this is less often the case than one might hope. Neither the Catholic Church in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, nor Islamic leaders in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, were vocal or effective in standing up to the worst abuses of government.

None of this should lead us to forget the hope and solidarity that religion provides for millions, nor to a denial that, in certain circumstances, religious believers are themselves persecuted and may become the focal points of resistance to tyranny and injustice. In many cases, organised religion has offered the most visible beacon of hope: the churches of African slaves, the moral authority of a Martin Luther King or an Archbishop Tutu remind us of the positive power of religious interventions in politics. The other side to the undoubted role of churches as a focal point for resistance to injustice is the role the Dutch Reformed Church and the white churches of Dixie played in maintaining systematic segregation and discrimination. The comment that the most segregated moment in US life is Sunday morning, when the nation goes to church, underlines the continuing involvement of religion in perpetuating racial divides.

More recently, the dictatorships of countries as different as Iran, Poland and the Philippines were overthrown by movements that drew much inspiration from religion. Yet, at least in Iran, the new régime introduced its own repressions. For every example from Latin America of pressures for social justice from ‘liberation theology’, one can find examples of collaboration between church, army and business élites to maintain extraordinary injustice. In the Philippines, the church, while ready to enlist in the anti-Marcos movement (and later in the overthrow of President Estrada), remains implicated in the semi-feudal relationships that have kept the country one of the poorest and most unequal in South-East Asia.

Religion is often an alibi, not a cause, for protecting the status quo. Yet the complicity of religion in perpetuating injustice and hierarchy is too frequent in history to be merely accidental. Too many millions have gone to war either with the blessings of priests or the promise of martyrdom for us not to be deeply suspicious of those who claim that peace is a universal concern of the spiritual.

DESPITE OCCASIONAL ATTEMPTS to impose religious beliefs in certain areas, especially those connected with sexual morality, all Western societies implicitly rest upon a division between political and religious authority that would be quite unacceptable to both the religious and the political authorities of, say, Saudi Arabia or Iran, and which is bitterly contested by religious parties in India, Israel and the Ukraine. Among rich democracies, the
US, along with Israel, is perhaps the only country where there is a significant strand of opinion that challenges the secular division between church and state.

The US remains marked by its original settlement by those fleeing religious persecution, and the creation of religion has always been a major US industry. Consider, for example, the remarkable success of churches such as the Mormons, and the role of missionaries in establishing a US presence in parts of the world such as China and the Pacific. (The Mormon Church, with its wealth, its missionary zeal, and its shameful history of killings, racism and sexism, is not only a peculiarly American creation; it now enjoys a bizarre legitimacy through its influence within the Republican Party.) Most remarkable to foreigners is the peculiarly American combination of apocalyptic beliefs and consumer capitalism, symbolised by fundamentalist preachers raising millions of dollars through television and drive-in church services. Indeed, the strange genius of American religion is its very Americanliness, the ability to present religion as part of the faith in progress as in the way in which concepts of ‘science’ have been embedded in deeply irrational sects such as Christian Science and Scientology. Perhaps there is also a link to the particularly American belief in the right to happiness, an amendment to John Locke’s original formula of the right to life, liberty and property, which encourages faith in both the perfection of this life and the next.

In most Western liberal democracies, religiosity does seem to have declined with greater affluence, but the US remains the great exception, with a degree of religious belief and practice far exceeding that of any other affluent liberal society. Increasingly, the largest cultural gap between the US and Europe is the striking collapse of religion in the latter as compared to the thriving churches of the US. At the end of 2002, one set of figures published in The Economist suggested that, while only thirteen per cent of Britons believed in the devil, forty-five per cent of Americans did, which almost exactly matched respective figures of support for the ‘unlimited right to abortion’. The language of faith and prayer, commonly deployed in US political campaigns, would be met by embarrassed titters in most of the rest of the Western world.

The US is unique in that it is both genuinely secular (in terms of not enforcing any particular religious beliefs) and deeply religious. Indeed, compared to Australia, the US is far more scrupulous in maintaining the forms of separation between church and state. Australia has a far higher percentage of students in (state-subsidised) religious schools, has a former archbishop as its head of state (or did until recently, when he stood aside because of rape allegations), and (perhaps a more trivial example) produces exclusively Christian images on its annual Christmas stamps (while the US Post Office carefully uses both religious and secular symbols). Yet far fewer Australians regularly attend religious services or hold fundamentalist religious beliefs. It was striking that, when the present prime minister visited Washington in February 2003, he was widely reported as attending church services. Back home, it would be extremely unusual to see photographs of a political leader attending a church service.

A number of commentaries on the 2000 US presidential election drew attention to the deep division between the religious sector of the population, more likely, at least if white, to vote for Bush, and the secular population, concentrated in large cities and on the two coasts, more likely to vote for Al Gore. In reality, US secularism has meant the absence of any one official church, not of religion itself.

Even under a President like George W. Bush, who constantly refers to the centrality of his faith, the US remains officially a secular society. Yet there is little doubt that political decisions are constrained by the power of organised religious belief, indeed often by the extraordinarily successful mobilisation of fundamentalists who have made up a growing portion of the Republican Party since the political realignments of the 1970s. The rhetoric of anti-communism and the Cold War was folded into a generalised defence of faith against ‘godless communism’, and, ever since Billy Graham was a regular guest at the White House, evangelists have had extraordinary access to Presidents of both parties. The defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment, the constant attacks on abortion rights and homosexuality, and the moves to outlaw the teaching of evolution and of human sexuality in schools are all divisive issues in American public life, and all symbols of the divide between those whose belief leads them to wish to impose their view on others and those who are categorised, often as a term of abuse, as ‘secular humanists’.

From the outside, the connection between religiosity and violence is one of the most striking aspects of American culture. Only in South Africa does one see the same juxtaposition of gun shops and churches, and it is hard to escape the connection. More secular democracies, such as those of Western Europe, Australia and Japan, are also far more restrictive in their gun laws, have ended capital punishment, imprison smaller proportions of their population and have less restrictive mores around sexuality, although here there are odd variations in the US, given the way the court system has on certain issues (such as pornography and abortion) adopted positions askew to public opinion.

A willingness to use military force to intervene in other parts of the world is closely linked to an evangelical view of the world, whereby the imposition of American values and institutions is seen as mandated by God’s teachings. The rhetoric of evil — a favoured word of both Bush and Reagan — echoes their religious perception of the world. In Reagan’s case, this was accompanied by an apparent belief in the reality of the Apocalypse, which seems more muted in the current administration, more determined to impose God’s way in this world. Religious beliefs and organisations have an ongoing impact on US foreign policy, and hence on the rest of us. Israel has won support from US Christians since its foundation, but this has increased dramatically in recent years, to the point where right-wing Israelis are even more effective lobbyists for hard-line Israeli governments than is American Jewry.'
Even at my most angry moments, I do not wish in any way to limit the right of people to believe what they will and to worship whom they must. But the privileging of religion means that somehow to question ‘faith’ is seen as improper: those of us who do not believe are required to treat priests and imams as somehow above secular criticism, to ‘respect’ creeds that are not defended with any more rational argument than exists for the astrology column in the local suburban newspaper. Nor is it only respect that is demanded: most states, including some in apparently secular and humanist Western Europe, award all sorts of tax concessions to religious institutions, place clerics on government committees and assume that some form of religious belief is ‘natural’ to all humans. Many countries have severe penalties for blasphemy, and even those which don’t tend to see attacks or satire of religion as improper, so that the Pope is accorded a status far above the US president in terms of his immunity from criticism. Yet as Salman Rushdie wrote after the communal riots in Gujarat in 2002:

In India, as elsewhere in our darkening world, religion is the poison in the blood. Where religion intervenes, mere innocence is no excuse. Yet we go on skating around this issue, speaking of religion in the fashionable language of ‘respect’. What’s there to respect in any of the crimes now being committed almost daily around the world in religion’s dreaded name?

Discussion of religion is often limited in the name of accepting and celebrating diversity, as if religion were equivalent to race. In fact, religious beliefs are far more akin to political ones, and should be subject to the same scrutiny. The real dilemma is that those whose beliefs are based on faith are unwilling to enter into the sort of rational debate that allows for the possibility of accepting they might change their minds. Most religious people will immediately deny they want to threaten other people’s choices, yet this is exactly what they do when they invoke religious beliefs to oppose abortion or prescribe how women should dress. Liberal democracies thus struggle to lay down universal laws that might reconcile a commitment to individual rights with respect for religious beliefs that defy these precepts, and nowhere is the conflict more difficult to resolve than in determining the conflicting rights of child, parent and the larger society around questions such as sex education, school curricula or the use of certain medical procedures.

If you have read to this point, you might of course object that, while religion is often used to legitimise intolerance and persecution, it does not in itself cause these. Of course there is no single cause for inhumanity, and religion can both tame as well as inflame violence and hate. In the end, the real conflict has nothing to do with whether people do or do not believe in a transcendent being, but, rather, whether out of this belief comes the conviction that they have the right to impose their will on others. All religions have their dissenters, who would argue for greater tolerance and acceptance of diversity based on their readings of sacred texts and their belief in the supernatural. Yet, in most parts of the world, their voices are less significant than those who use religion to impose and maintain restrictive social order, usually based on both existing class and gender systems of domination.

I would argue that, ultimately, religion does more harm than it does good. Many who have argued against religion in the past have also feared that its absence would lead to even greater irrationality, but I doubt it. As physicist and Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg said: ‘With or without religion, good people behave well and bad people can do evil, but for good people to do evil — that takes religion.’ A genuinely secular world is more likely to be a world in which there is genuine respect for human diversity and dignity. Pascal argued that, as we cannot know whether God exists or not, we should bet on his existence. I would rather we bet on faith in human knowledge and experience than myths and legends to make sense of the world in which we live.