

A-fear-ism

The Ignorance Of Atheism

by Mat Dickie



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*This book is dedicated
to the walls against whom
I sharpened my claws...*

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FOREWORD

“We have nothing to fear but fear itself.”

- *Franklin Roosevelt*

I’ve always been fascinated by ignorance. The sheer gall to have strong opinions about things you know very little about! As a child growing up I was a huge fan of professional wrestling, which was (and to some extent still is) the laughing stock of sporting entertainment. Although I saw the value in it, nobody else did and I found myself defending it on a daily basis.

“You do realize it’s fake?!” came the taunts.

“You do realize it’s MEANT to be fake?!” came my frustrated response.

My fellow wrestling fans and I liked the sport precisely because it WAS theatrical. We knew better than anyone else how the wrestlers conspire backstage to give the audience a show. It was a whole other art form in itself known as ‘booking’. We marvelled at the athleticism of these energetic stuntmen, and happily suspended disbelief to let them stir our emotions. To casual onlookers, however, it was something to ridicule. What they knew about the profession wouldn’t even fill a wrestler’s jockstrap – and yet we had to accept their damning appraisal of it as valid?! It was my first taste of ignorance and injustice, and I never forgot it.

As an adult who now lists religion and philosophy among his greatest passions, it seems the past has come back to haunt me on a grand scale. After all, it has become fashionable to assume that religion

is as ‘fake’ and ‘fictitious’ as any wrestling show. And as with wrestling, those that voice such opinions tend to have a brittle understanding of the subject matter in question. If they did, they would know that a spiritual thinker is better equipped than anybody to deduce the symbolic meaning of scripture. It gives a whole new meaning to “preaching to the converted”! Those that have a sound understanding of scripture are being told what it contains by people who have never even read the books in question. It’s hard to take such ignorant opposition seriously. As Pocahontas sang to her arrogant oppressor, “If the savage one is me, how can there be so much that you don’t know?”

Most criticism tends to be born of ignorance. As with my other passions, the more I learn about religion the more the arguments against it seem crass and unreasonable. It’s like the stakes have been getting higher and higher until I’m no longer defending a sport or an entertainer – I’m defending God himself! And defence is most certainly called for. Not because a deity needs ‘defending’, I hasten to add, but because cynical minds need defending from themselves. Never in the history of mankind has the impulse towards God been questioned as brazenly as it is now. In the western world especially, people in their millions have thrown off the shackles of religious authority and embraced a secular world view. Gathering under the banner of scientific thinkers like Richard Dawkins, they grow bolder in confidence and louder in their criticism of religion.

I speak from experience because, as a religious educator, I encounter the spiritual views of our young men and women on a daily basis. I observed one recent class where a room full of 40 teenagers each had to share a philosophical opinion. All except one of them

began by saying “I don’t believe in God or anything, but...” – and even the one that did profess a Christian faith was soundly persecuted for doing so. My heart sank with each declaration of atheism. Not because atheism is inherently ‘wrong’. The mantra of religious education is that “there are no right or wrong answers” – you can only ever fail to have an intelligent opinion. My quarrel with atheism is that it falls far short of being as ‘intelligent’ and ‘rational’ as it claims. As we shall see, it’s one of the most irrational belief systems to ever be embraced so fondly – far surpassing any religion or cult.

Of course, there was also something else at work when those teenagers proudly denounced religion. In addition to having a clumsy understanding of the religions in question (and an even clumsier understanding of the atheism they subscribed to), there was also the instinct of self-preservation to contend with. Teenagers are deeply cynical at the best of times (I certainly was!), and seldom have the wherewithal to express an independent opinion – especially not one that is perceived to be ‘weak’ or ‘uncool’.

Further to that, many people consider atheism to be the ‘easy’ option. All they have to do is claim that there’s no God and they simultaneously retain their reputation AND avoid having to answer any awkward questions. But that’s not how it works in my class! There are just as many questions to ask of the committed atheist, and we shall explore them in this book. What we’re really talking about here is human insecurity. As the title *A-fear-ism* suggests, I will expose atheism to be an irrational ‘fear’ of religion – one that is fuelled by a potent cocktail of ignorance and arrogance.

Of course, an atheist may playfully concede that they ARE indeed ‘fearful’ of religion – fearful of the damage it does to our minds and of the terror it unleashes on our streets! You don’t have to look very far to find a disagreeable religious person – one whose sanity you question and whose company you avoid. I will illustrate that an individual ceases to be ‘religious’ the minute they exhibit such unreasonable behaviour. Deep down, the atheist is simply annoyed by people he beholds to be religious – and knows no better way of expressing that annoyance than to reject everything and tar everybody with the same brush. I will expose the folly of such reasoning and prove that religion is nothing to be afraid of.

In the same way we can see fear in a person’s eyes, I claim to be able to ‘see’ atheism in there right alongside it. After all, they do say the eyes are the window to the soul! There’s a coldness and a darkness in the gaze of a cynical mind – one that reflects how deeply the soul is buried. It’s what causes me to refer to people as ‘dead-eyed’ atheists. For all the talk of ‘enlightenment’, it’s as though a light has gone out – as they wilfully lock themselves away in a dungeon of materialism. If I may be so bold, I should like to turn the ‘light’ back on for a while to see what we find...

Mat Dickie
Grimsby, England
Christmas 2009



The author of this book, Mat Dickie.

1. FOOL PROOF

“The kingdom of God doesn’t come with observation. It’s not ‘here’ or ‘there’. Rather, the kingdom of God is WITHIN you.”

- Luke 17:20-21

A book like this would normally begin by seeking to ‘prove’ the existence of God. The Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas felt the need to offer no fewer than 5 such ‘proofs’! However, it was mostly circumstantial ‘evidence’ rather than incontrovertible ‘proof’. Evidence that has been hotly disputed over the centuries by secular thinkers such as Bertrand Russell, David Hume, and (most recently) Richard Dawkins. Indeed, Aquinas himself would go on to say that “one should not try to prove that which cannot be proved,” since to do so only “gives non-believers grounds for mockery.” Retrospectively, he might have followed his own advice!

Instead of staggering down that fruitless path once more, I should like to begin by conceding that the existence of God CANNOT be proved – and nor should it be. At least not in the material sense. Initially, the appeal for proof seems reasonable – which is why so many of us clamour for it. But upon closer inspection, it’s actually quite an odd stance to take. Its main error is that it assumes that only that which can be ‘proved’ has value. This is the basis of an entire philosophical movement (albeit a redundant one) known as “Logical Positivism”. Although it seems to make sense at first, in reality we accept the existence of thousands of things that cannot be ‘proved’. For instance, you cannot ‘prove’ that you love your mother. That doesn’t mean it isn’t so! ‘Love’ is a curious sensation that circles your heart and

occupies your mind. It's no one 'thing' that can be perceived by another, nor can it be measured by any device. All we can do is appeal to another human being to identify with what we feel.

In a similar manner, one might 'feel' the existence of God – but it's not a feeling that can be conveyed or 'proved' anymore than love can. What if God IS love, as so many religions have encouraged us to consider? What if God is an intangible emotion that courses through the veins of receptive entities? In that case, physical proof becomes a thoroughly inadequate way of beholding something that simply isn't physical.

The same is true of other abstract ideas such as art. Let us stare up at Michelangelo's work on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. I say it's a work of art but you insist that it's just a smattering of paint. Which one of us is right and how do we prove as much? The artwork does indeed consist of coloured paint, so am I wrong to endow it with meaning? I can implore you to appreciate how hard it was to paint and how rare an achievement it is, but what if you don't choose to FEEL that way? The artistry of God is just as easily overlooked. When we take a thoroughly scientific view of things we literally "fail to see the bigger picture"!

As a teacher, the work submitted to me by my students is another example. Looking at it 'rationally', an essay is nothing more than ink on a piece of paper – but it wouldn't serve anybody to appraise it as such! I have to endow the patterns of ink with meaning and deduce a level of understanding that can't necessarily be 'proved'. Materialists are in error when they focus on one level of existence at the expense of all others. It's what Alexander Elchaninov referred to as "only seeing the water in the complex wine of religion."

Above all else, the belief that “only that which can be proved has value” is in itself an abstract idea... which cannot be proved! In the irony to end all ironies, proof cannot be proved and therefore ceases to have value. It’s what is known as “self-referentially incoherent” (most secular criticisms are), which is why “Logical Positivism” quickly became the laughing stock of philosophy.

The fascination with proof falls down on many other levels too. When a human being seeks to ‘prove’ the existence of something, what he’s actually looking for is proof that satisfies his 5 limited senses. Again, this sounds like common sense at first but is revealed to be anything but upon closer inspection. For a start, it’s a thoroughly egocentric world view that assumes the entire universe revolves around man and his 5 fallible senses! Apparently, anything we cannot perceive does not exist. Not only is this arrogant in the extreme (most secular criticisms are), but it’s blatantly not true either.

In fact, it’s a scientific fact that it’s not true! With more powerful instruments than our own, we can ascertain the existence of millions of things that we couldn’t ordinarily perceive. There are radio waves and television signals encircling you right now – only you can’t make sense of them because your brain alone is not the right equipment for the job. Similarly, my cat can see things I can’t see, hear things I can’t hear, and smell things I can’t smell. As majestic as the human form is, it has its limitations (many of which thankfully preserve our sanity!) and simply cannot be relied upon to confirm what does or doesn’t exist. It’s rather like when we behold the air around us to be “empty space” when it is in fact a substantial cocktail of elements. This is what Plato meant when

he claimed that our senses are ‘inadequate’ and insisted that we must “appeal to a higher faculty” to ascertain the truth.

When questioning the existence of God, people can often be heard professing to only believe in what they can ‘see’ or ‘feel’. Thomas Jefferson (himself a closet atheist) declared that he was “sufficiently occupied with what is so without tormenting myself about what may be.” This is all well and good if our senses do a reliable job of comprehending all there is to comprehend, but the simple fact is they don’t. For a start, you’re not seeing this page as it really is! This is a complex network of energy in the form of billions of jostling atoms. But your brain fills in the gaps and regards it to be a recognizable image in order to make sense of the physical world. If you’ve got that wrong, what else have you got wrong? You may want to start with the assumption that there’s no intelligence lurking behind that energy.

All this talk of ‘energy’ brings us to yet another flaw in our penchant for proof. When we seek to prove the existence of something, we’re essentially assuming that we are separate from it – as surely as a scientist looms over a specimen in his laboratory. In this case, we are “over here” and we must prove the existence of that thing “over there” known as God. But what if God isn’t a ‘thing’? Contrary to popular belief, no major religion genuinely considers God to be a wizened old man with a beard! The image Michelangelo gave us was quite literally an “artist’s impression”.

The Jewish concept of God (as seen in the *Old Testament*) veers in that direction with talk of meeting him “face to face” and being “guided by his hand”, but these are largely metaphorical terms that helped to make sense of the experiences people were having. Even when ‘The

Lord' is thought to dwell among us in human form, we are inclined to think of a 'representative' of God as distinct from God in his entirety. As for the classic "made in his image" line, this is also open to interpretation and tends to mean that we are made of the same SUBSTANCE. A part of God in other words. This sentiment is drilled home when Moses gets God to reveal, "I am what I am" – i.e. life as it happens to be showing up at any given moment. No one part of it in particular.

Centuries later, Jesus put this profound idea back on the table by insisting that "the kingdom of God is WITHIN you" and "the Father and I are one". Whichever way you cut it, religion tends to think of God as an omnipresence force that defies physical categorization. This is actually scientifically true too, because quantum physics invites us to believe that everything in the universe is actually made of ONE thing – energy. Everything we see, hear, and feel can be reduced to atoms and then sub-atomic particles, until we eventually find ourselves contemplating an intangible 'energy' that underpins everything. As *Hebrews 11:3* intones, "The things which are seen are made of things which are not seen." The religious view is that this energy is endowed with a certain intelligence (or 'nous' as ancient Greek philosophy had it) and is best described as 'God'.

If there's any truth to this tantalizing assumption then it throws a spanner in the works of scientific investigation. Not only is God not a 'thing' but it's also not "over there"! At least not exclusively. As the definition of 'omnipresence' dictates, God is EVERYTHING and EVERYWHERE. The sum total of every atom in the universe, and every kilojoule of energy that permeates those atoms. As the wise old

Obi Wan Kenobi character explains in *Star Wars*, “The Force is a presence created by all living things. It surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the universe together.”

The result is that we find ourselves trying to prove the existence of something we’re a part of – which is as silly and counterproductive as a dog chasing its tail! You ARE the proof you seek. As the Sikh scriptures intone, “God is a river. How can a fish within it measure its limits?” It’s like one hand asking the other hand whether it ‘believes’ in the body. They ARE the body, lacking only the realization. As the *Book Of Job* states, “In my flesh I see God.” The role of religion and philosophy is to bring us to this profound realization. It simply can’t be arrived at by dwelling on material evidence.

Secular thinkers such as Richard Dawkins find this logic risible, claiming that a lack of proof allows us to assert the existence of ANYTHING – from flying pigs to unicorns! Dawkins is fond of Bertrand Russell’s analogy of a “floating teapot” that lurks behind the sun where we cannot see it. Because we cannot DISPROVE such a thing any more than we can prove it, we are asked to keep an open mind about it – no matter how much it defies common sense. This is supposedly comparable to the religious conviction that God exists in the absence of proof.

This rather seductive analogy falls down on several levels. The ‘teapot’ beloved of atheists isn’t without its cracks! For a start, there’s no REASON to believe that a teapot occupies outer space – whereas there are plenty of reasons to assert the existence of God. Whether you believe in God or not, any human being can at least ‘imagine’ that such an entity exists – fashioning the world as surely as we might cultivate a

garden, etc. Even in the advent of evolution, we can imagine that a deity presides over such a process. It makes sense on some level. By comparison, the teapot analogy would only hold up if a brown liquid poured from the sky in a thick solitary stream!

It's rather like when cynics compare a belief in God to a belief in 'fairies'. Richard Dawkins even begins *The God Delusion* with a misguided quote from Douglas Adams that implies as much – protesting, “Isn't it enough to enjoy the garden without believing there are fairies at the bottom of it?” But a creative deity isn't comparable to a mere entity that occupies a garden. As the *Qur'an* illustrates in *Surah 16*, “One who creates is not the same as one who creates not.” This is what would be known in philosophy as a “transitional error” or a “category error”. We're shoehorning something where it doesn't belong. The correct analogy would be, “Isn't it enough to enjoy the garden without believing in gardeners?” Which, of course, is a slightly less reasonable question to pose.

Furthermore, nobody ever achieved anything by asserting the existence of something like our hypothetical teapot! There's no record of Jesus saying, “By the way, the reason I'm so wise and graceful is that there's a teapot that floats around the sun.” Nor did modern revolutionaries like Gandhi and Martin Luther King credit such a thing for inspiring their achievements. What these reputable voices DO invite us to believe is that there's a powerful force known as God that we might like to tap into. If we stubbornly rule out the existence of such a thing, we do so at the expense of accusing these people of being profoundly 'deluded' – which simply doesn't ring true. We shall explore this in later chapters about delusion and the person of Jesus.

The testimony of the human race itself is almost as valid too. People in their millions don't instinctively sense the existence of arbitrary objects in the way they do with God. Communities that exist in separate continents without interaction are more likely to share a concept of God than any other invention of the mind. Indeed, that's arguably what the world's various religions and cultures are. Quite frankly, we wouldn't be having this conversation if God didn't exist on some level. It simply wouldn't occur to us. This is the basis of St Anselm's much misunderstood "ontological argument", which we'll be exploring in later chapters.

As we're already beginning to see, there's something quite insecure about the constant demand for proof. When a spouse or child professes to love us, it's seldom our first instinct to demand proof! We simply take it at face value and reciprocate the sentiment. They would be horrified if we responded any other way. Similarly, when someone arranges to meet us we don't demand documented 'proof' that everything will unfold as planned. We work on the assumption that it will.

It seems we're happy to forfeit proof when it suits us. Richard Dawkins even finds himself doing it in defence of science. It's a myth that science deals in incontrovertible 'facts'. It merely points to the truth by a process of elimination. It helps us to establish what is highly 'likely' versus what is highly 'unlikely'. An investigation conducted with more precision or in different circumstances might very well yield different results – such as when we were convinced that atoms were the smallest possible thing (hence the name 'atom'), only to find that it's possible to go even deeper into the realm of sub-atomic particles. A

more poignant example is the plight of Heinrich Hertz, who assumed the conditions of his laboratory were ‘irrelevant’ to his study of radio waves – only to discover that they were bouncing off the walls and messing up his measurements!

Richard Dawkins uses this scientific approach to assert that the existence of God is ‘unlikely’, but then backtracks when it transpires that the idea that life evolved out of nowhere for no reason is equally ‘unlikely’. The “anthropic principle” dictates that the universe is finely tuned to cultivate life on this planet. If the ‘Big Bang’ was out by so much as one in a billion then life as we know it would not exist. The odds against it happening by chance are so extraordinary as to invite the involvement of a divine intelligence. The only argument against this is the circular one that there may be as many universes as there are planets, and that at least one of those would accidentally stumble upon perfection. The irony is that these ‘multi-verses’ cannot be proved! It seems the scientist is willing to believe in anything EXCEPT God.

When scientific theories are scrutinized incessantly in this manner Dawkins protests, “It is utterly illogical to demand complete documentation of every step of any narrative.” Indeed it is. But religion isn’t granted this room to breathe when it seeks to express itself. This result is that religion is a special case that must endure excessive scrutiny. Perhaps justifiably so given that the existence of God and the validity of religion is a big question with far reaching consequences. But so are many other things for which we let proof slide. It may not always be possible to ‘prove’ things beyond doubt, but there is always plenty of ‘evidence’ to shape our thinking. I believe religion falls into

this category. As this book unfolds, we shall see that a belief in God is far more ‘rational’ than sceptics like to think.

Before I conclude this chapter, I should perhaps justify my opening remark that the existence of God “should not” be proved. In addition to believing that God is a non-physical phenomenon that defies physical proof, it’s also my belief that this is entirely for the best. If you think about it, God’s existence can never be obvious because that would defeat the purpose. As the poet John Keats reflected, “How beautiful are the retired flowers! They would lose their beauty if they demanded to be admired.”

I once saw a staunch atheist on TV smugly offering that he would believe in God “if he waved down from the sky”. Let’s forgo the bizarre assumption that God is so insecure that he would contort the fabric of time and space in order to grant a spectacular show to an undeserving, cynical mortal. And let us also once again forgo the assumption that God is some sort of tangible monster that has a face to show and a hand to wave in the first place! The real flaw in this popular request is that it would have a negative effect on human behaviour. If God loomed over the earth with a spectacular form and a thundering voice, we would believe in her alright – but it would be a belief based on FEAR! Instead of coming to her of our own volition, we would be forced to embrace her like a child that has been kidnapped. What loving parent would want that relationship with their offspring? Imagine if your children only acknowledged your existence when you put a gun to their head! The love they offered would mean very little, and their emotional development would be painfully stunted.

And therein lies the answer. By humbly hiding behind a veil, God invites us to take steps towards her. It's what is known as an "epistemic distance" that we need to travel in order to better ourselves and develop spiritually. A student doesn't learn anything if the answers are obvious. They're hidden at the back of the book for a reason! Going back to that smug atheist that wants to receive a salute from God, what virtues has he demonstrated to deserve such a boon? Cynicism? Arrogance? Ignorance? And what would he learn from such an encounter? That we shouldn't give credence to things until the last minute, by which time it's too late to benefit from our foresight? It's ironic that atheists demand a religious experience the most but deserve one the least. It's rather like parading through the forest whilst banging a drum, claiming to be looking for a rare bird. Their very approach alienates the thing they seek to find.

The Russian priest Alexander Elchaninov likened his secular opponents to 'drunkards' who were "intoxicated with the world". As surely as it's impossible to reason with an alcoholic drunkard, he felt it was impossible to convey spiritual truths to a matter-bound atheist. He asked that they "sober themselves" of ignorance and arrogance before engaging in a dialogue that they might understand. As the apocryphal text of *Wisdom 1:4* intimates, "Wisdom will not enter into a soul that deviseth evil." Intellectuals often fancy themselves as having the capacity to understand all things, but their smug self-regard is actually a handicap that must be overcome. This is the attitude that St Paul was critical of at *Romans 1:20* when he said, "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools." The mind is like a parachute – it works best when open!

There's a charming anecdote from the 17th century discovery that the earth revolves around the sun, instead of the other way around as we had previously assumed. Two scientists are musing over it and one says that it never occurred to him that the earth would revolve around the sun because it appears as though the sun circles the earth each day. To which the other scientist protests, "What do you imagine it would look like if the earth DID revolve around the sun?!" The answer is of course that it looks the same either way, so we shouldn't have been so quick to rule it out.

I feel this is a fitting question for atheists to ask themselves. What do you imagine the world would look like if there WAS a God? A deity neither looms in the sky like a monster, nor is it interested in meddling in human affairs to our detriment. The simple fact is that this is the life that God envisaged for us – one that we're making for ourselves (for better or worse), with only the gentlest inspiration from beyond. His hand in creation can never be proved and will never be obvious – as surely as the hands of a parent cannot be felt on the back of a child who's learning to ride a bike. That doesn't mean goodwill is not sent after the beloved child, and it doesn't mean parent and child won't be reunited after they've had their fun. It may not be possible to 'prove' the existence of God, but there is a trail of evidence to guide the sincere seeker home...

2. WEIRD SCIENCE

“The arrogance that would make God an object and impose experiments upon him is incapable of finding him.”

- *Pope Benedict XVI*

The quest for proof is a scientific endeavour, which shows how much that field has shaped our thinking and language. In many ways for the best. No sensible person would dispute the glorious role that science plays in the human experience. It allows us to know things about the physical world for certain and proceed accordingly – often to enormous advantage for both mankind and the rest of nature. Throughout this book, you’ll hear me proudly proclaim that such-and-such a fact is “scientifically true” – the implication being that we know for sure that it is so. This is all well and good where it applies, but the simple fact is there are lots of grey areas where the insights of science do NOT apply. Science is what it is – a meticulous study of the physical world as it pertains to human life. Nothing more, nothing less. Abstract ideas like God and religion remain outside of its remit.

It’s what is known as “non-overlapping magisteria” – the idea that science and religion are their own separate domains and never the twain shall meet. The cliché goes that science deals with questions of ‘how’ while religion lays claim to the ‘why’. Richard Dawkins (who else?) bristles at this implication, protesting that scientists are just as qualified to answer questions of ‘why’ as any theologian (a field for which he has scant regard). It is of course true that scientists can express philosophical opinions like any other human being – and they can do so very intelligently and articulately. However, the point is that it’s not

their area of expertise – nor is it an endeavour to which they can dedicate their time and efforts. This is the defining luxury that the theologian or philosopher has. So while a scientist is entitled to express a view on religion, it remains just that – an opinion. One that we are in no way obliged to accept as our own.

It's with some consternation, then, that I find myself being asked to accept that science has somehow 'disproved' the existence of God and the value of religion?! It has absolutely nothing to say about those aspects of the human experience. Science is entirely mechanical and has no philosophical dimension. Saying you believe in 'science' and not 'religion' is like saying you believe in 'car' and not 'red'. They're not mutually exclusive and neither one has an awful lot to do with the other! It's perfectly possible to have a 'red car' (although the idea may not appeal to you). Science brings us back facts about the material world, but how we feel about them is entirely another matter – one on which science has no bearing. It may enrich our understanding of religion or it may compromise it.

What science HAS proved is that certain passages in the *Bible* do not make sense when taken literally. A scientific study of the universe reveals that it is billions of years old (rather than a few thousand), and that life on this planet evolved gradually by natural selection (rather than materializing instantly over the course of 6 days). Ever since this became common knowledge, religion has been portrayed as being at odds with science. But as we shall see in the next chapter, God and religion exist independent of a clumsy interpretation of scripture (one particular scripture at that). The revelation that *Genesis* should not be taken literally is neither here nor there. It's not an argument against

God existing, nor is it an argument against religion having deep philosophical value. It's rather like telling a scientist that he shouldn't urinate in his test tube! Well, quite. Can the grown-ups get back to what they were doing now?

We shall explore the implications of evolution more deeply in the next chapter, but for now we can take it as a prime example of how the separate domains of religion and science are often confused. Specifically, creation is an ACT whereas evolution is a PROCESS. Neither one has anything to do with the other. To assume they do is a "transitional error" of the most grotesque kind. It seems the only exercise scientists get is jumping to conclusions! Going back to the 'teapot' analogy beloved of atheists, it's the equivalent of disputing that somebody made you a cup of tea just because we know that an electric kettle boiled the water. The science of boiling water has no bearing on WHO employed that process – nor what their motives were.

Despite all this talk of separation, the irony is that science and religion actually have a lot in common. They're two different impulses towards the same thing. Religion is entirely philosophical and expresses itself in poetic terms that are easy to undermine. Science, on the other hand, is entirely factual and crushes the spirit with an excess of information. Neither one is entirely useful nor entirely useless. Both, however, stand in awe of the same thing – though they call it by different names. Religion sees the majesty of all that is and calls it 'God'. Science sees the majesty of all that is and calls it 'Life'. But the words 'God' and 'Life' are interchangeable. The pantheistic view is that life IS God and God IS life. Everything we uncover about life tells us more about God and vice versa. To this end, religion and science are

growing closer and closer together until we realize they were never apart – rather like the two strands that form a helix! Scientists spend every day looking at a perfect metaphor for how their work is intertwined with religion.

As I posited in the previous chapter, quantum physics hints at this underlying unity between science and spirituality. The notion that everything in the universe is made of the same substance validates everything religion has ever asked us to believe. It turns out that the mantra of us all being ‘connected’ is quite literally true, and the “one thing” we constitute is best described as God. It even lends credence to ‘miracles’, which simply become the ability to manipulate the building blocks of life. When we consider that ‘thoughts’ are a kind of energy as surely as radio waves are, it’s not much of a leap to assume that physical reality is a product of intense thought – whether it comes from us individually or as a collective. ‘Monists’ traditionally argue that everything is a product of matter. It might just be that matter is a product of mind.

If religion and science are opposed at all, it is in the same way that our thumbs ‘oppose’ our fingers and our fork ‘opposes’ our knife – it’s an opposition that allows us to GRASP things! We assume that science is ‘killing’ religion when it cuts into it. On the contrary, the scalpel of science is performing a life-saving operation. Dogma is a cancer that needs to be removed – however painfully – for the patient to survive. As Immanuel Kant assured one of his confidantes, “I’m destroying dogma to make room for faith.” This is what Catholics describe as arriving at a “mature faith” – one that has endured criticism and emerges all the stronger for it. The irony is that Richard Dawkins and

co could be doing more for spiritual progress than any religious institution! Evidently, God does indeed use the most unlikely instruments to do her bidding.

Zen Buddhism has a saying that encapsulates this way of thinking: “Before I studied, a cloud was just a cloud. After I studied, a cloud was no longer a cloud. Now that I understand, a cloud is again just a cloud.” Throughout any learning process our perception goes through these changes. In this case, we take the world at face value, then break it down into energy, and finally reconstruct it to appreciate it as it was before – only this time with true understanding rather than ignorance. Understood this way, science is PART of spiritual thinking rather than an obstacle to it. It’s just that it slots into the middle instead of being the final word. It’s what psychologists have referred to as “forming, storming, and norming.” People come together politely enough, then push the boundaries before arriving at an even better understanding of one another. We’re currently in the middle of that process, but I suspect religion and science are destined to be reconciled amiably.

In the meantime, we must acknowledge that things exist and have value independent of our scientific understanding of them. Up until recently, we couldn’t fathom how a bee manages to fly. Its body mass versus its wing span didn’t seem to lend itself to flight as we understood it. But the bee has scant regard for what we proclaim to be ‘possible’ or ‘impossible’! He simply does what he feels and leaves us to play catch up. Similarly, a spiritual individual takes to the skies and refuses to be bound to the earth by the limitations of science. It’s ironic that scientists bristle at a primitive understanding of the universe and yet they think the world revolves around them! As Giambattista Vico

observed, “Whenever men can form no idea of distant or unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand.” Scientific thinkers are just as guilty as religious believers when it comes to viewing everything through the prism of their own expectations.

The over-arching problem with a scientific world view is that it places undue emphasis on the physical. As the cover of this book suggests, I liken it to a bird that has become so accustomed to its cage that it refuses to leave – blissfully unaware that an even better existence awaits outside. Plato famously used the analogy of a ‘cave’ that we inhabit, shrouding ourselves in a self-inflicted darkness. For all the talk of ‘enlightenment’, atheism is the coldest and darkest place the human mind can go to! As Jesus cautioned, “He who values his life will lose it.” Sometimes our fondness for our own mortal existence prevents us from having a meaningful one.

Cynics may accuse religious people of being ‘deluded’ that something exists when it doesn’t, but they’re equally ‘deluded’ when they insist that there’s nothing more to life than meets the eye. It’s the kind of ignorance that Hindus refer to as ‘avidya’. Seeking to be “down to earth” is all well and good – but such an individual remains closer to the depths of hell than the skies of heaven! The purpose of religion is to TRANSCEND the physical world and put it in perspective. Not to cling to it as though it were all there is. It’s like a butterfly emerging from its casing and taking to the skies to live a more colourful existence.

This is the Buddhist ideal of ‘detachment’. The Buddha’s “Noble Truths” posit that suffering is caused by ‘desires’ or ‘attachments’. Cast your mind back to the last time you were aggrieved and you can bet a desire of some description went unfulfilled – even if it was the

understandable desire to avoid death or harm. These desires are like nerve-endings that we release into the world. It should come as no surprise that we experience pain when they are trampled on! True happiness requires that we REDUCE these nerve-endings (or at least deploy them more wisely), whereas a materialistic world view prolongs our attachment to this world. It is the only thing that matters, after all. This is the single biggest sin that the atheist commits. That lack of perspective would still breed misery even if God didn't exist. They sin against themselves first and foremost.

The spoon within a bowl of soup cannot 'taste' the soup in question. Likewise, we miss out on something when we behold ourselves to be nothing but matter and settle for a purely mechanical role in life. Religion inspires us to set our sights higher. As Jesus intones at *John 10:10*, "I am come that they might have life and have it more abundantly." The physical world is the rock upon which a spiritual life is built. It's not a surface upon which we should settle. The scientist's love of life should translate into a love for the CREATOR of life. As Cotton Mather put it, "If people admire a small part of what Wisdom has made, they are stark mad not to admire that Wisdom itself." Science is like a finger pointing to the moon. Instead of focusing on the finger itself, we should allow it to direct our gaze towards a more heavenly vision.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu observes that a house consists of walls and windows – but it is the SPACE within that makes it liveable. So too must we accept the material world for what it is and derive greater pleasure from "the things which are not seen"...

3. BY THE BOOK

“The tales of the Torah are simply her outer garments, and woe
to the man that regards the outer garb as the Torah itself!”

- *Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai*

“Judging a book by its cover” is supposed to be so laughably ignorant that nobody actually does it. But cynics do it all the time in their scathing assessment of the *Bible* and other scriptures – books they’ve never even read, let alone understood. Even when atheists do claim to have flicked through the *Bible*, their understanding of it leaves a lot to be desired – as does the sincerity with which they have approached the text. Wilfully misunderstanding a document is arguably worse than not bothering at all.

I can scarcely enjoy stand-up comedy anymore without being subjected to a woefully misinformed rant about one religion or another. “There’s a talking snake!” exclaims Ricky Gervais in his enlightening exploration of *Genesis*. Yes, a metaphorical ‘serpent’ that symbolizes being led astray by irrational impulses. Gervais went on to claim that he would use the *Bible* as “toilet paper” if he found himself left alone with it on a desert island. So a document has no value whatsoever if we happen to disagree with a clumsy interpretation of the first chapter? You can’t beat that airtight secular ‘reasoning’! It’s ironic that he has been led astray by the very irrational impulse he mocked the existence of. The ‘serpents’ of ignorance and arrogance poison his every word.

Another comedian quips, “One word for all the Christians out there – dinosaurs!” Yes, those large beasts used to roam the earth. What does that have to do with a religion about moral reasoning? And why is it

that ‘Christians’ have to answer this particular charge, given that *Genesis* is primarily a JEWISH document? At the risk of stating the obvious, the *Old Testament* is Judaism and is only embraced by Christians by association. Comedians fancy themselves as being ‘controversial’ and ‘edgy’, yet they’re petrified of mentioning the word ‘Jew’ lest they be denounced as Nazis! Ditto for those that tread carefully around Muslims for fear of reprisals. Christians should take solace in the fact that they are attacked so brazenly. It’s a testament to how docile they are.

I appreciate that comedians are only joking when they say these things and don’t entirely subscribe to what comes out of their mouths. However, what isn’t a joke is how few people are able to separate fact from fiction. In the western world, most people take the story of creation in *Genesis* literally and know no other interpretation of the text. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in the USA, where half the population still disregards the theory of evolution and clings to the belief that God made the world in 6 days just a few thousand years ago

Richard Dawkins calls it “an intellectual disgrace” and indeed it is. But the irony is that even people that DON’T believe in the *Bible* are guilty of taking it literally! They take it literally and then reject what they have taken literally. The result is that great swathes of the human race have a bad relationship with scripture. Half of us read too much into it, whereas the other half read too little into it. As the author C.S. Lewis lamented, “We assume the *Bible* is so artless that anyone can comprehend it at a glance.” The reality is that it is a work of extraordinary depth and must be approached with due respect. The fact that we don’t is an “intellectual disgrace” just as grave as the one that

perplexes Richard Dawkins. It is what I must call a “philosophical disgrace”.

There’s a charming anecdote from the (rather less charming) trial of John Scopes in 1925, who was vilified for teaching the theory of evolution in God-fearing Tennessee. In amongst the arguments flying back and forth between ‘Creationists’ and ‘Darwinists’, the religious lobby claimed to be offended by the implication that they were descended from apes. The Indian thinker Paramahansa Yogananda jokes that while this was going on a monkey died and its soul gravitated towards heaven to answer before God. Upon being informed that his kind were related to mankind, he protests to the contrary and insists that humans are lying, murdering, sinful wretches! It’s not hard to empathize with the monkey’s appraisal of humanity when we engage in so many petty squabbles as we do today. We assume we have evolved for the better, but there is something within our souls that has gotten worse.

Critics of evolution often dismiss it as a ‘theory’ – one that doesn’t hold up because of “missing links” and “irreducibly complex” organisms that must have been intelligently designed. This is to misunderstand the scientific definition of ‘theory’, which is not a ‘hunch’ as we would normally understand it. It does in fact refer to an idea that has been verified by successful experimentation and peer review, so evolution is not weak in this regard. It’s a fact that the species on this planet evolved from less sophisticated ones. It’s just not a fact that has any bearing on the existence of God.

If we’re being churlish, we might argue that it’s not even an argument against life being ‘created’ in its entirety. It’s perfectly

possible that a contingent of the human race evolved gradually whereas others were manifested instantly! Rather like it's possible to cook the same thing slowly in the oven OR quickly in the microwave. The science simply tells us that this wild hypothesis is so 'unlikely' as to not warrant consideration.

The most depressing thing about the perceived war between religion and science is that it's not at all necessary. Evolution isn't an argument against God existing, nor is it even an argument against the story of creation having philosophical value. Charles Darwin himself didn't even go down that road. He maintained something of a belief in God. From what I can gather, the untimely death of his daughter did more to shake it than anything his work threw up.

Incidentally, the "theory of evolution" is nothing new and actually predates Christianity. As far back as ancient Greece, a philosopher named Anaximander was positing that all of life developed from the element of 'water' (which is strangely accurate in a way!). A little later, we even find Empedocles putting forth a primitive form of natural selection. He speculated that organisms slowly adapt to their surroundings over time based on their 'likes' or 'dislikes'. Charles Darwin's contribution was to VALIDATE these musings by establishing a "mechanism of change", which was "descent with modification" – the observation that suitable offspring thrive and reproduce effectively enough to pass on their 'advantageous' characteristics.

This is thought to rule out God's main role as a creative 'designer'. But as we've already established in previous chapters, God and religion exist independent of ANY scientific discovery. Whatever science

reveals, a religious person can always claim that God presides over it. Science becomes the process of figuring out “how it was done”, and can actually lead to a richer understanding of the Creator. As the philosopher Conor Cunningham puts it, “Science prevents our definition of God from being too small.”

In this case, we credit a deity with conceiving of and then kick-starting the process of evolution. Richard Dawkins naturally finds this inadequate and protests that such a deity would be ‘lazy’. However, this overlooks the fact that an omnipresent and omniscient God would be embodied in every step of the process. There is no part of it that does not concern her. She conceives it, guides it, and is the perfection towards which it aspires. In fact, this is exactly what the trinity of Gods (‘Tri-Murti’) in Hinduism represent. *Brahma* is the ‘Creator’ that sets the ball rolling, *Vishnu* is the ‘Sustainer’ that keeps it going, and *Shiva* is the ‘Destroyer’ that brings things to a natural end. The mechanics of the natural world could not be embodied more effectively. Some even speculate that this is what the word ‘GOD’ is an acronym for – ‘Generator’, ‘Operator’, and ‘Destroyer’.

The observation that a plant grows from a seed doesn’t rule out the existence of the gardener that planted it – nor the sun towards which it grows. We’ve already established that everything in the universe is energy manifesting itself differently. Evolution may simply be the mode of expression. If it’s my intention to crawl under a table, I subconsciously go through various stages to make it happen. If we were to analyze that process halfway through, we might wonder what a man is doing on his hands and knees for no apparent reason! Likewise, evolution seems ‘blind’ and chaotic from our perspective – but if we

could see it unfold in the blink of an eye and knew where it was going (as God no doubt does) then its divine purpose would become apparent. It's already possible to see glimmers of it in human history (what Hegel referred to as "the march of God in the world"). As the Buddha taught, there's a connection between our thoughts and our reality. We're constantly shaping tomorrow based on our actions today. Evolution IS that process writ large.

Perhaps this is what was meant by the curious idea that God "rested on the 7th day". It was her intention to create using a self-regulating process like evolution, which she could then 'rest' in instead of meddling in directly. Indeed, it could be argued that evolution is an essential part of spirituality. Since time immemorial, Indian religions such as Hinduism have posited that the soul incarnates as various life forms – progressing from minerals and plant life to animals and humans. Even within the realm of human incarnations, the soul is said to incarnate repeatedly in an effort to perfect itself – learning from mistakes and cultivating positive traits. It's not dissimilar to the way natural selection gradually shapes our physical forms. All science asks us to consider is that what's true for the soul is also true for the body.

Even the story of creation that we have in *Genesis* isn't that far off the mark. In many ways, it is consistent with science and could be considered prescient of its discoveries. The opening claim that "the earth was without form and darkness was upon the face of the deep" is remarkably consistent with what we know about the 'Big Bang'. We imagine it to be a colourful explosion, but a formless 'darkness' would have indeed reigned until the gaseous matter condensed into something more tangible. Similarly, verse 20 of the *King James Version* says, "Let

the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life” – which is entirely consistent with the evolutionary claim that life crawled out of the sea.

Genesis has the sequence of events largely correct. Only the alleged time frame raises questions. But this assumes that each ‘day’ does indeed refer to a solar ‘day’ as we would understand it. The original Hebrew term could actually be taken to mean a ‘period’, which invites us to think on a grander scale (evolutionary epochs perhaps). This is backed up by the opening claim of Chapter 2 in the *King James Version*, which reveals “These were the GENERATIONS of the creation of the earth.” For all this talk of “6 days”, it’s not even that rigid a claim! Even if we did take it as 6 literal days, we could still interpret it as “a relatively short time from the perspective of a deity.” As *2nd Peter* 3:8 clarifies, “One day is a thousand years by the Lord’s reckoning” (a sentiment shared by the scriptures of Islam among others).

This brings us to the “Young Earth” theory that the world is barely 6’000 years old. But this isn’t an officially accepted doctrine either. The idea wasn’t even entertained until 1650, when Archbishop Ussher of Armagh took it upon himself to ‘estimate’ the time of creation based on the apparent genealogies in the *Old Testament*. The date he arrived at was 4’000BC. The folly of this endeavour was that it assumed every single name in the text corresponds to a real human being – and that their life-spans were comparable to our own! The risks of symbolism and inaccuracy were ignored, and he duly found himself staring at an odd date for the creation of the world. 4’000BC may have been a ‘beginning’ of a significant era in human history, but it wasn’t THE

beginning of life itself. Unfortunately, as Winston Churchill lamented, “A lie is halfway around the world before the truth has even got its pants on.” The irresponsible musings of one theologian have given sensible religious believers yet another cross to bear.

There’s no denying that these eccentric beliefs persist in the 21st century (especially in America), but they defy official Church doctrine and therefore cease to be representative of religion proper. The Catholic Church itself accepts a scientific explanation of creation. They simply conclude that the Big Bang and evolution are the ‘methods’ that God employed. Pope John Paul II conceded that “the *Bible* teaches us how to go to heaven – not how heaven goes” (diplomatically quoting Galileo on the subject). Some theologians such as James Clerk Maxwell have cautioned against bending over backwards to accommodate science to this extent – lest religion be forced to backtrack as often as science does. Science thrives on learning from mistakes, whereas divinely revealed truths are supposed to be on surer footing.

In my view, the story of creation simply isn’t important enough to warrant this much debate. There’s a reason it only takes up ONE page in a tome consisting of thousands! Religions are scarcely interested in exactly how the world developed and will always fast-forward to a point where they can talk about human conduct. That’s exactly what *Genesis* does. It quickly establishes that a deity carefully crafted life as we know it for a reason. We then see Adam & Eve act out the story of how early man was led astray by materialism and fell out of harmony with the place he calls home. Those key ingredients are as relevant today as they were when they were conceived. Myths have more to tell

us about the PRESENT than the past.

All of this may sound like convenient ‘back-tracking’, but the truth is that religions have always been comfortable with symbolism and have refrained from taking things literally. In fact, the delicate art of interpretation is an entire field of study known as ‘hermeneutics’. Judaism, in particular, has always been adept at exploring the hidden meaning of the *Old Testament* (or the *Torah* as they would know it). On this very issue Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai cautions, “The tales of the *Torah* are simply her outer garments and woe to the man that regards the outer garb as the *Torah* itself!” It is considered blasphemy to dwell on the surface meaning instead of digging deeper. The literal meaning, known as *p’shat*, is the least of FOUR layers that a passage may have. From there, it progresses to *remez* (the point being made), *drash* (the moral lesson), and finally *sod* (the hidden meaning). Muslims takes a similar attitude to the *Qur’an* – the stories of which are mercifully brief so as to avoid missing the point. Muhammad puts everything into a spiritual context at all times.

It’s remarkable that an epic philosophical treatise like the *Bible* is judged by a brief story that sets the scene at the beginning. It’s the equivalent of denouncing *The Origin Of Species* as “that book about a bloke who sails aboard a boat.” For some reason, we seem happy to take the story of creation literally but neglect to treat the thousands of other allegories likewise. For instance, Israel is repeatedly likened to a ‘vineyard’ – but we don’t insist that every square inch of Israel be harvested for grapes! The only thing reminiscent of growing fruit is that we “pick and choose” what we want to swallow. The irony is that the book of *Genesis* ends with the story of Joseph, which is all about

interpreting the hidden meaning of things. As the Islamic version points out in the 12th *Surah* of the *Qur'an*, “The Lord will teach you the interpretation of these events.”

Fervent believers may protest that a symbolic view compromises the idea that scripture is the “word of God”. Contrary to popular belief, the term “word of God” doesn’t actually refer to ‘words’ that are written or spoken as we would normally understand them. As we shall see in the next chapter, it refers to energy in the form of sound. The simple fact is that no scripture we possess is an infallible record of what God imparted to anyone at any time. Even documents as recent as the *Qur'an* from the 7th century have been edited and translated numerous times. Indeed, it only ever existed in the illiterate mind of Muhammad and was committed to writing by others.

Similarly, the valiant efforts of Jewish scribes only preserve the *Torah* as it existed around 500BC – after almost 1’000 years of Chinese whispers. It’s no coincidence that it reflects the plight of Jews at that time. They were languishing in exile at the hands of the Babylonians and began reinterpreting things through the prism of that experience. Indeed, the bizarre creation account we see in *Genesis* is thought to be an assault on Babylonian mythology. The seas, stars, and beasts that held so much significance for them are reduced to effortless ‘creations’ in the hands of the Jewish deity Yahweh! And he’s also said to have done it all in a mere “6 days” before ‘resting’ from then on – whereas the inferior Babylonian God had to sustain creation on an annual basis. There’s a good case for it being propaganda that has to be carefully decoded. As we established, myth is more interested in the present than the historical past.

As Richard Dawkins points out in *The God Delusion*, this means we're appealing to our own faculty of reason to establish what these books say – and then how much of what they say we agree with. God is barely involved at all! It's certainly true that we must tread carefully around scripture. The Islamic thinker, Jalaluddin Rumi, compared the world's various faiths to different perceptions of an elephant in a darkened room. Some touch its trunk and believe it to be one thing, whereas others touch its leg and believe it to be another, etc. Although each is touching upon the same thing, they respond to it in different ways.

That's not to say that all the world's religions are laughably wrong and their scriptures are littered with errors. The hypothetical object being touched does exist after all. More often than not, the 'errors' are our inadequate understanding of someone else's poetic sentiments. It's like an antique that is perceived to have no value by the untrained eye, whereas an expert would perceive it to be very valuable indeed! Misunderstandings occur in conversations with people we know nowadays. How much more likely are we to misunderstand the words of a foreign man that spoke thousands of years ago? It is for this reason that Socrates loathed the written word and refused to document his teachings. For him, wisdom was something alive and natural. It had to be tailored to the individual engaged in conversation. To etch it onto paper was to kill it. He lamented that it became easily misunderstood and "remained silent when questioned".

This is also one of the reasons that Jesus preferred to speak figuratively in his memorable 'parables'. It was his way of making people comfortable with symbolism. In fact, he resented being taken literally! At *Matthew 16:12* he tells his disciples to "beware the yeast of

the Pharisees” and is incredulous when they assume he is actually talking about bread. This episode should be far more famous than it is. We see a similar exchange at *John 3:4*, where he tells Nicodemus that he must be “born again” and finds himself explaining that it doesn’t involve re-entering his mother’s womb! Rather poignantly, he laments that a clergyman like Nicodemus should know better (which is as true today as it was then).

Of course, Christ’s most famous use of symbolism is when he compares his broken body and spilt blood to ‘bread’ and ‘wine’ respectively at the “Last Supper”. Although the Catholic concept of ‘transubstantiation’ implies there is a literal element to this ritual, most people appreciate it as a symbolic gesture. In the days building up to this moment, Jesus likened his life to a “grain of wheat” that must “die in the ground” in order to bear fruit. Ditto for the ‘vine’ that must be slain to produce wine. As surely as wheat has to ‘die’ to make bread and grapes have to ‘die’ to make wine, Jesus’ body had to perish to make Christianity. This is the sentiment that he sought to leave his disciples and subsequent followers with.

There are literally hundreds of other examples of this penchant for symbolism. Elsewhere, Jesus likens the human body to a ‘temple’, compares his disciples to ‘doves’ and ‘serpents’, and even employs the idea of dirty crockery to admonish the Jewish priesthood! For now, it suffices to say that religious people are in grave error when they take these poetic sentiments at face value. If nothing else, it’s an insult to the wisdom in question and the great minds that brought it forth. As Jesus himself added at the end of each discourse, “Those that have ears to hear should hear.” The *Qur’an* has a similar mantra which is, “There

are signs for those who understand by tokens.” The implication is that the ability to understand properly is of great merit. We all claim to ‘listen’ but very few HEAR what is being said. Like the proverbial ‘seed’ Jesus often spoke of, religious people must take a humble sentiment and extract a value from it that wasn’t obvious at first.

‘Creationism’ and other fundamentalist beliefs may seem to be synonymous with Christianity, but surely a man ceases to be a ‘Christian’ when he disregards everything Christ stood for? The same goes for insincere members of any faith. As we shall see in later chapters, there’s a difference those who ‘appear’ to be religious and those who genuinely ARE. We need to become more adept at distinguishing between the two.

Despite their presumed intellectual superiority, atheists don’t fare any better with symbolism either. They too are guilty of taking scripture literally – the only difference is they reject what they have misunderstood! A little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing, and scholarly types are prone to march a thousands miles in the wrong direction upon discovering one trivial fact. One such argument beloved of cynics is that it seems many religious conventions predate Christianity. They relish recounting that there were tales of “virgin births” and “resurrected heroes” long before Christ was associated with such things, and that he is therefore just the latest in a long line of legends. Ditto for the products of nature that religious festivals read significance into. Their fundamental error is that religion doesn’t claim to have ‘invented’ these things so much as it embodies them and draws out their true significance. Words predated Christianity too, but it doesn’t mean Christ didn’t use them to good effect! Religion is less

about innovation and more about putting something that already existed into perspective – namely life itself.

We might ask why this symbolic language was used at all if it is so easily misunderstood and divisive. Why not just state facts that cannot be disputed? Well, the simple fact is that it wouldn't be possible to do that even if spiritual teachers wanted to. Imagine going back in time a few thousands years to impart everything you know about the world today. There would be no scientific language to accompany the scientific truths you seek to convey! When trying to explain that our bodies consist of 'atoms', you would soon find yourself repeating *Genesis 2:7* where 'dust' is used to hint at the smallest possible substance. When putting forth the notion of the 'Big Bang', you would find yourself uttering "In the beginning..." before grasping at words such as 'light' to describe the energy that burst forth. And even where evolution is concerned, you might find yourself using 6 hypothetical 'days' to describe the swift progress made in several key stages.

It's rather like when we hear ourselves repeating things that our parents used to say. We fancy ourselves as being more advanced, but there are certain timeless truths we must inevitably return to. Religion is the misunderstood adult and we are the childish ones by comparison. As Albert Einstein humbly acknowledged, "The ancients knew something that we seem to have forgotten."

Contrary to popular belief, the early Church was perfectly comfortable with the symbolic language they were exposed to. We are the ignorant ones by comparison! As far back as the 4th century, St Augustine could be found championing common sense. Most perceptively, he warned that taking the *Bible* literally was the biggest

mistake Christians could make – remarking that it’s “dangerous to be heard talking nonsense.” He knew that if religious people were wrong on an intellectual level then nobody would take them seriously on spiritual matters either. This is exactly the quandary we find ourselves in today, as the western world is asked to either take religion at its word or reject it altogether. We have been left very little room in the middle to manoeuvre. As Jesus lamented, it seems the road to enlightenment is very ‘narrow’ indeed and very few people walk it...

4. WHAT KIND OF GOD?

“I do not say there is no God, and until you tell me what you mean by ‘God’ I am not mad enough to say anything of the kind.”

- *Charles Bradlaugh*

The philosopher Karl Jaspers observed that atheists don’t actually disbelieve in God per se, so much as an IDEA of God that they’ve been presented with. Or as Karen Armstrong puts it, “Atheism is parasitically dependent on the theism it seeks to eliminate and becomes its reverse mirror image.” Rather bizarrely, the Romans considered Christians to be ‘atheists’ on account of the fact they didn’t believe in their pantheon of deities! Richard Dawkins jokes that we’re disproving the existence of deities one by one and only have one more to go. But even he concedes that his quarrel is only with God as traditionally understood. As we saw in the previous chapter, most atheists are simply unimpressed by the interpretation of scripture that they’ve been subjected to. Unfortunately, they can muster no better way of expressing that dismay than to reject everything and tar everyone with the same brush. It’s like a game of intellectual dominoes – once one piece falls, all the others must fall with it.

This line of reasoning is almost as childish as a game too! It’s quite an irrational response if you think about it. Because ONE chapter of ONE book from ONE religion doesn’t make sense when interpreted ONE way... there’s no God? In any other walk of life, that warped logic would get you locked up! Generalizations are seldom on sure footing. The intelligent response would be that there’s something not

quite right about our impulse towards the divine, and that a more agreeable concept of God may exist in the face of a disagreeable one.

If we are bitten by a volatile dog, we don't dispute the right of the canine species to exist! It merely informs our decision to give a home to a more lovable creature. Likewise, our bad experiences with God and religion needn't be reasons to reject those things. On the contrary, the walls erected might just guide us to a better destination – if we would only continue walking. As Neale Donald Walsch muses, “There's something we don't understand – the understanding of which will change everything.” God may be ‘one’, but that doesn't mean there's only ‘one’ way to behold the one thing that God constitutes.

We've already established that the main problem people have with God is that they assume she's a ‘thing’ that's over ‘there’. They then become disillusioned when this imaginary monster doesn't come out from wherever it was hiding. As we discussed, there's absolutely no scriptural basis for taking this view and very few religious people actually do. The world's various faiths are often thought to contradict each other, but they tend to be in agreement as to who and what God is. Even Hindus believe their many Gods are merely representative of the many facets of the one true God (‘Brahman’).

It always comes back to a curious omnipresent ‘energy’ that pervades everything in existence. Indeed, Guru Nanak's *Mool Mantra* begins with the suggestion that “God is all-pervading.” It's a concept that we also see throughout the Hindu scriptures. As the *Bhagavad Gita* intones at Chapter 6, Verse 30: “For one who sees me everywhere and in everything, I am never lost.” The universe is likened to God's body – hence the fact that she is conscious of every atom within it, as surely as

we are aware of what is taking place anywhere in our own anatomy. This also informs the Christian view that God can “count the number of hairs on your head” and the Islamic view that “a leaf does not fall without Allah’s knowledge.”

This idea that God is everything and everything is God is known as ‘pantheism’. It’s often dismissed as an eccentric Eastern belief, but it’s actually prevalent in Christianity and Judaism too. The *Gospel Of John*, in particular, is very mystical and begins with the enigmatic words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word WAS God... nothing was made without it.” When we hear the term ‘word’ with regards to God, we assume it refers to literal ‘words’ that are spoken or written at a deity’s behest. This is seldom the intention, as it originally referred to a nondescript ‘sound’ – an energy that God uses to accomplish things in the physical world. It’s what Christians know better as “The Holy Spirit”. Simply substitute the word ‘energy’ for ‘Word’ in St John’s introduction and see how much more sense it makes!

This vibratory force is rendered in Hinduism as the sound ‘Aum’ – a humming noise that is thought to underpin the whole of creation. Some speculate that the Christian term ‘Amen’ originated from the pronunciation of ‘Aum’. It is certainly synonymous with prayer and can often be heard in deep meditation. When sitting in motionless silence, one begins to hear and feel sensations that normally go unnoticed. Chief among these is an enchanting humming noise that emanates from the “medulla oblongata” at the base of the skull. This is the experience that *Revelation 1:10* speaks of when it says, “I was in spirit and heard a loud voice behind me like a trumpet.” The *Old Testament* prophets also

share this experience, such as in *Ezekiel 43:2* where God's voice is likened to "the sound of many waters." This is a perfect description of the sensation in question.

It's no coincidence that sound is also synonymous with the revelations of Muhammad. He is quoted as saying, "They come to me like the reverberations of a bell. When the reverberations abate, I am aware of the message." We imagine that God 'spoke' to people like Moses and Muhammad and then fell stone silent for thousands of years. The reality is that she's speaking to everybody all the time and always has been. It's just that some tune into the divine broadcast better than others! As Neale Donald Walsch muses, "The question is not to whom does God speak – the question is who listens?"

The idea that a 'vibration' is at work in the world is actually quite scientific. Observers of outer space have ascertained that the universe does indeed emit a humming noise, which is associated with the Big Bang. This is backed up by "String Theory", which suggests that the energy in the universe is influenced by various vibrations – such as those that elicit different sounds from a violin string. Everything we see, hear, and touch is quite literally energy vibrating at various frequencies. When we consider that 'thoughts' are manifestations of energy – as surely as radio waves are – it's easy to appreciate how the world could be a product of one divine thought, moulded into shape by those of our own. Monists like to think that everything is 'matter' and mind is merely an illusion. It might just be that everything is 'mind' and matter is the illusion!

The *Qur'an* hints at this tantalizingly prospect in *Surah 15* where it states, "We created man from SOUNDING clay, moulded into shape."

The ‘clay’ used to create life as we know it is not the material kind so much as an intangible energy – a ‘sounding’ vibration. *Genesis* also hints at this creative substance with the immortal line, “Let there be light.” We assume it refers to the illuminating ‘light’ we get from the sun or a bulb, but it’s actually a reference to ‘light’ in its purest form. Neither a wave nor a particle, ‘light’ is more of a building block than an entity in its own right. It becomes a catch-all term for an intangible ‘energy’ out of which all other things are made. Replace the word ‘light’ with ‘energy’ in the story of creation and it suddenly begins to make more sense!

This is why Jesus is often credited with achieving things “by the Holy Spirit”, etc. It simply refers to his ability to manipulate the building blocks of life in ways that would astound the average person. As Confucius observed, “He who knows the method of change and transformation may be said to know what is done by that spiritual power.” An individual that can harness this divine energy is best described as a “son of God”. This is what the *Gospel Of John* assures us when it says, “To as many as received him, he gave them power to become sons of God.”

Contrary to popular belief, the term ‘son’ does not refer to offspring in the crude, biological sense. It’s all about ‘reflecting’ God. Physical existence is like a pool of water into which the shining moon of God seeks to be reflected. If the surface is restless and murky, the reflection is similarly distorted and doesn’t do its source justice. But if the surface is pure and calm, the reflection is perfect and represents its source well. What better way to describe something that embodies the qualities of ‘the Father’ than ‘the Son’? As *Hebrews 1:3* puts it, “The

son is the radiance of God's glory – an exact representation of his being.” It is for this reason that Islamic mystics speak of “polishing the heart” so that it reflects God.

Paradoxically, this is why Jesus could claim to be “one with God” without actually claiming to BE God. It refers to being “on the same wavelength” as God (quite literally with all this talk of vibration!). Perhaps this is also the significance of the idea that we’re “made in God’s image.” Divinity is a hypothetical ‘image’ that we’re supposed to be reflecting back as best we can. And the beauty of the analogy is that we’re also “made of the same substance” to this end. This is why *Exodus 3:14* has God telling Moses, “I am what I am.” God is whatever we’re fashioning with the fabric of existence at any given moment. As the Islamic mystic Junayd mused, “The colour of the water is the colour of the vessel containing it.”

Cynics and believers alike often find themselves pondering where God came from if such an entity exists. The crux of Richard Dawkins’ argument in *The God Delusion* is that God is so ‘complex’ as to require a creator himself. It’s what he calls “The Ultimate Boeing 747” – riffing on the claim that life is so well designed that the idea it arose by chance is as absurd as a fully functioning machine being constructed by accident when a tornado sweeps through a junkyard. The argument goes that if ‘complex’ things require a creative designer then surely a deity is the most ‘complex’ entity of all? Dawkins goes on to argue that the existence of God is therefore less ‘probable’ than believers like to think.

Once again, this assumes that God is some sort of tangible entity to whom the limitations of the physical world apply. Because WE require

a creator in our complexity, we assume that this also applies to God. This is a self-aggrandising error. The simple fact is that God exists above and beyond the physical realm – as surely as a king flouts the seemingly immutable ‘laws’ of his kingdom! It’s what philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas described as “the unmoved mover” or “the uncaused cause”. God is thought to be the “first cause” back to which all created things can be traced. After all, the law of causation only applies to ‘finite’ material objects – whereas an ‘infinite’ deity is anything but. As surely as a wave can emerge from the ocean and blend back into it, the ‘wave’ of physical life can emerge from the ‘ocean’ of divinity and blend back into it. The ocean still exists without the wave, but the wave cannot exist without the ocean. This is what the *Guru Granth Sahib* seeks to convey with the humble line, “God is the river. How can a fish within it seek to measure its limits?” The folly of smug atheists is that they claim to be able to do just that.

The profound truth is that everything always has and always will exist. It’s a myth that things ‘begin’ or ‘end’. These are merely illusions that we buy into as humans. When did you ‘begin’? When you came out of a woman or when you went into one? Didn’t part of you exist in the body of your father as well as your mother? And were those bodies not fashioned by the food and drink they consumed elsewhere? On and on it goes until you trace your heritage back to the first gaseous matter to emerge from the Big Bang.

The same is true of death. When do you ‘die’? When the soul departs from the body or when the corpse deteriorates beyond recognition? Doesn’t that energy live on in the soil and sustain the food chain all over again? Technically, you’ve already ‘died’ a few dozen

times already. As the scientist Steve Grand points out, every single atom in your body has died and been replaced within the past 12 months. You're literally not the same person you were last year! You're constantly being rebuilt with new components. People should consider that when they deem the 'resurrection' of Christ to be so unlikely. You've already performed that particular miracle yourself.

Einstein wasn't exaggerating when he claimed that "energy never dies". Everything always has and always will exist – just not in the same form. 'Birth' and 'death' are simply bookmarks that we place on an endless flow of energy in order to make it mean something. That "endless flow of energy" is best described as God. He's not a wave in the physical world like we are – he's the ocean from which a wave emerges and into which it returns. As *Malachi 3:6* states, "I am the Lord, I DO NOT CHANGE." Only physical things change. There's a reason God is often referred to as 'infinite'! A supreme intelligence lurks BEHIND the laws of physics – it isn't circumscribed by them. As we've already discussed in previous chapters, this is the folly of trying to use physical methods to prove the existence of something that simply isn't physical.

All the world's major faiths endorse this idea that God is a primordial presence that always has and always will exist, defying the conventions of physical life. The Jewish *Zohar* cryptically reveals that the *Torah* was written "before the world was created." God is even credited with using the scripture to create the world in the first place! Likewise, Christ claims to have always existed with the enigmatic line, "Before Abraham was, I AM." He obviously wasn't claiming to have existed as the human being called Jesus since time began (as his

bewildered audience speculated). Rather, he meant to imply that he embodied a creative force that has always been at work.

Muslims also chime in at this point with their belief that ‘Muslims’ existed prior to the Prophet Muhammad and anyone could be one. In fact, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus are credited as being among the greatest of Muslims! This is because a ‘Muslim’ is simply one who surrenders to the will of God, and that has been a possibility for as long as there has been a God to honour. In other words, Islam – like Christianity and Judaism – is a concept that has always existed and just so happened to come to fruition in the hands of Muhammad in the 7th century. Like God itself, religion has no beginning or end.

This is why it’s often considered ‘idolatry’ to worship God in a physical form. The famed Jewish *Ten Commandments* begin by insisting “Thou shalt have no other Gods before me” and “Thou shalt not make any likeness of that which is in heaven above.” Meanwhile, Islam speaks of the folly of “partnering things with Allah” (which is the blasphemous sin of ‘shirk’). This is all largely down to the fact that it’s not POSSIBLE to encapsulate God in a material image! The fact that it’s distasteful is secondary. Even Hindus concede that their images of various Gods are merely ‘aspects’ of something greater. Their *Bhagavad Gita* scripture reminds us that “no form can contain God.”

God is a constantly changing process. The ‘blasphemy’ lies in denying that fact by hitting the pause button on one image in particular. As Bruce Lee lamented of the martial arts he loved dearly, “You’ve solidified something that was meant to be fluid.” He preferred to think of the various martial arts as ‘fluid’ systems that could blend into one another. For him, true mastery was the versatility to call on the right

tool at the right time – like water that flows where it will and ‘becomes’ the vessel it is contained in. In this manner, organized religion is guilty of ‘solidifying’ God. By clinging to the past we choke the future and turn something vibrant into a motionless corpse. This is perhaps what atheists find most disagreeable. But to smash the solidified ice isn’t the best course of action. The divine energy of God need only be thawed out again to flow more freely...

5. TRIAL SEPARATION

“Seekest thou God when she is manifest within thee?
Thou deemest her to be another, but she is none other than thee.”

- *Muhammad al-Harraq*

Our concept of God informs the meaning we ascribe to life (if any at all). In most cases, God is an ‘omniscient’ intelligence that knows everything in theory – but such knowledge is secondary to experience. In my previous book, *Sportuality*, I likened it to the difference between a sportsman on a playing field and the spectator watching at home. In many ways the spectator has a superior perspective, but he would give anything to be the player at the moment a goal is scored!

Legend has it that God expressed this desire once and physical life burst into existence. Droplets of soul then raced to inhabit the atoms so as to feel alive for the first time. This is perhaps the meaning of *Genesis*’ opening line, “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” Life as we know began with a divine energy dividing itself into that which is physical and that which isn’t – so that each might bring out the best in the other and allow meaningful experiences to take place.

This line of thinking is known as ‘dualism’ – the idea that life is a push and pull between two opposing forces. Specifically, a spiritual element and a physical element. This is the significance of the Chinese symbol of “Yin & Yang”, which forms a circular whole from two contrasting components. It’s certainly true that nothing exists in any meaningful way without its opposite. Imagine writing on a whiteboard with a white pen! You would be utterly incapable of expressing

yourself. Only the introduction of darker shades would make your message clear. The same applies to God and the soul. That which is spiritual would be unable to express itself without a physical medium through which to do it.

Expression is the soul's greatest joy. It delights in a body that acknowledges its existence and proceeds accordingly. This is the sad thing about atheism. In a cynical mind, the soul is imprisoned in a dark dungeon and neglected. I claim to be able to 'see' atheism in a person's eyes. After all, they do say it's the window to the soul! Actually, it's more accurate to say that I DON'T see anything because it's as though a light has gone out. The light of spirituality lay buried beneath thick layers of ignorance and arrogance. It's never entirely extinguished though. A room that remains dark for thousands of years can be illuminated instantly by light. So too can the closed mind of an atheist gush with spiritual insight upon being prized open.

Indeed, the problem with this interplay between the physical and the spiritual is that it's all too easy to overlook. A foray into the physical world isn't without its risks, and the soul can find itself being compromised by the very matter it sought to enliven. It's rather like an infinitely loving puppy being abused by its inconsiderate owner. The difference is that the soul can never be destroyed and patiently waits for the body to tire itself out in protest! As Paramahansa Yogananda observes with breathtaking insight, "A flower releases its fragrance even when crushed in the hand."

This is the wisdom that Jesus embodied when he "turned the other cheek", "loved his enemies", and voluntarily died the most horrific death that humanity could muster. Only those that place value on

matter seek to save the mortal body. A spiritual master is more interested in being liberating from it. As Jesus supposedly said to Judas, “You will outdo them all because you are the one that will disrobe me of this mortal body.”

That said, even religious people are led astray by the perceived difference between the physical and the spiritual. Although they acknowledge the spiritual, they locate it too far away and imagine themselves to be separate from something that is within them. Indeed, it’s often denounced as ‘blasphemy’ to lay claim to unity with God! But as Jesus himself confirms at *Luke 17:21*, “The kingdom of God is WITHIN you.” The Prophet Muhammad also offers this insight to Muslims with the haunting line, “Allah is closer to you than your jugular vein.”

But many religious individuals have felt unworthy of accepting this enticing truth. In Christianity it is known as the “Arian Controversy” – named after the philosopher Arius, who saw Jesus as a distinct “special creation” of God and bristled at the idea that he might have a human component. And yet he also disputed that this “special creation” was comparable to its creator. His rival, Athanasius, countered that it was more blasphemous to “think of God in such human terms” and insisted that he was an intangible force that transcended physical limitations. In his view, the divine AND the mortal were effortlessly intertwined – especially in the case of Jesus.

The illusion that we’re somehow separate from God is what Neale Donald Walsch refers to as “separation theology”. It’s one of the reasons we can conceive of a judgmental, vindictive God. Such a deity is invariably a reflection of our own human frailties. Because we are

weak and insecure, we paint those characteristics onto God. As evidenced by the curious confession in the *Old Testament*, “Thy God is a jealous God!” Going back to the idea that God is love, it’s interesting if you make good on that in scripture by literally replacing the word ‘God’ with ‘Love’. “Thy Love is a jealous Love,” for instance! It says more about the way humans conduct themselves than God herself. As the 16th *Surah* of the *Qur’an* concedes, “People attribute to Allah that which they hate about themselves.”

Nonetheless, the *Old Testament* and the *Qur’an* seem to favour this frightening idea of a wrathful God that grows upset at humanity’s every move. Like the folly of the story of creation, this unpalatable prospect is one of the reasons that people prefer to think that God doesn’t exist at all. Again, this is a little unfair because it’s perfectly possible for a benevolent deity to exist despite our fabrication of an evil one. Observing that the God of scripture is invariably a human being writ large, secular thinkers like Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx concluded that “a man’s belief in God is nothing more than a belief in himself.” As with most secular arguments, this only works as an argument against a God “of a certain kind” and has no bearing on ultimate reality. In fact, as we shall see in a later chapter, it is often atheists who are guilty of casting themselves in the role of God.

In my ignorant youth, I recall that my brother and I taunted my faithful mother for believing in the God of the *Bible*. “If God exists then truly he is the devil,” came my melodramatic condemnation. Like everyone else, all I ever heard was how people were “going to hell” (or being otherwise punished) for one reason or another. You’re left to assume that this God is very easily upset and must enjoy torturing

humans on some level! I used to joke that God “gives with one hand and repeatedly punches you in the face with the other.” Such an insecure masochist would deserve more pity than worship. It’s no wonder that atheists and agnostics find themselves fleeing from him.

Of course, there is no such God and there never was. In that sense, at least, atheists might just be onto something! We may project our foibles onto God, but the reality is that a deity obviously wouldn’t have any such flaws. The ancient Greek philosopher, Xenophanes, was suggesting as much as far back as 500BC. It’s only possible to get ‘angry’ if you’ve been harmed or compromised in some way – and even then it’s a response that lacks character. The reality is that God is not a sensitive entity that can be harmed, nor is there anything she lacks because she IS everything! The *Qur’an* even concedes as much in *Surah 14*, where it is said that “the ingratitude of any number of people is insignificant because Allah is free of all wants.” God is far more passive than we like to think. Indeed, that’s perhaps the purpose of life – to emulate the serene calmness of God. To identify with the spiritual instead of the physical. As Jesus advises at *Matthew 5:48*, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your father in heaven is perfect.”

That said, a wrathful interpretation of God isn’t without merit either. Jews and Muslims aren’t ‘wrong’ when they conceive of a God that punishes and rewards. After all, this is an effective metaphor for the law of cause and effect. We personify God as this karmic law as it delivers its verdict on our conduct. This is why God is often conceived of as a ‘judge’. It may feel that way, but it’s more accurate to say that God presides over a system that we stubbornly bang our heads against. It’s like a fire that promises light and warmth, and only ever burns us

when we mishandle it! We shall explore this fully in later chapters about hell and the afterlife.

So going back to strange statements such as “Thy God is a jealous God,” we can see that even these make sense metaphorically. ‘Jealousy’ is a good way of conveying the idea that it’s inappropriate to equate created things with a creator (“partnering things with Allah,” as Islam has it). Not because God is an insecure cretin who would be hurt by such a lack of priorities, but because we hurt OURSELVES by disrespecting the powerful force that God embodies. All of God’s supposed interventions in human affairs are symbolic of our own self-destruction. Noah’s flood, for instance, is symbolic of the fact that most people ‘drown’ in their obsession with this world – neglecting to stay afloat in the ‘ark’ of spirituality. It’s not the work of a vindictive God who punishes us out of anger. God looks on with a furrowed brow as we repeatedly punish ourselves! ‘Anger’ is simply the best way of articulating the magnitude of those errors.

It’s rather like when we abuse the planet and then behold it to be ‘punishing’ us. The analogy isn’t factually correct, but nor is it entirely inappropriate. After all, there IS a self-regulating system that dictates that our actions have consequences – whether we believe those consequences are natural or supernatural. Poetic language is often dismissed as ‘fiction’, but it can sometimes convey more truth than a dour fact! For instance, if someone ignores me in the street I may recount that they “slapped me in the face”. What I’ve said is not factually correct, but nor is it untrue. In fact, the fiction holds more weight than the fact because I have endowed the encounter with meaning. This is the majesty of religious language. It seems absurd at

first, but actually contains even greater truths than a historical record. Cynics are in serious error when they assume it has no value.

Even among believers, this line of reasoning is often criticized for dismissing God as an ‘impersonal’ or ‘transcendent’ deity who doesn’t care what we do – as opposed to an ‘immanent’ or ‘personal’ one who takes an active interest. This conundrum has perplexed western theologians for centuries. Eastern belief systems don’t see much of a contradiction. After all, an ‘impersonal’ force can BECOME ‘personal’ upon harnessing it. Electricity, for instance, remains unmanifested and ‘impersonal’ most of the time – but we can manifest it as something ‘personal’ in the form of a lit bulb.

Likewise, the divine energy of God lay neglected most of the time and we (mistakenly) believe it to be of no consequence. But for the religious believer who channels that energy, it becomes very real and of profound significance. As Neale Donald Walsch muses, “The atheist’s beliefs are based on his experiences, whereas the master’s experiences are based on his beliefs.” Or as Emerson put it, “If we see no Gods without, it is because we harbour none within.” It goes back to what we were saying about the true definition of a “son of God” being one who embodies divinity and reflects it well. They take something abstract and MAKE it real. It’s rather like a bucket full of cream that reveals itself to contain butter once churned. It’s not God’s existence or power that’s at fault so much as our perception about what those things entail. If you think divinity lies at the end of the rainbow, that’s where it will stay. If you know it lies within you, that’s where it will be.

Hinduism has given much thought to this tricky area of spirituality and concludes that concepts of a personal or impersonal God are two

acceptable impulses towards the same thing. A simplistic idea of a God that looks like us and acts like us may not be entirely factual, but it is nonetheless a good stepping stone towards an abstract concept that might be otherwise difficult to grasp. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna reasons that an impersonal concept of God is the truest and most effective – but that it is also the most ‘arduous’ to arrive at. Like the parables of Jesus, personalized metaphors are deemed to be a good way of bridging the gap.

The Jewish mystics of ‘Kabbalah’ maintain that it is ultimately impossible to bridge the gap between man and God, but that we should nonetheless try because we grow by doing so. It’s the old cliché of “reaching for the stars” so that we might “land on a cloud”. There is everything to gain and nothing to lose. Indeed, by trying to “bridge the gap” between God and ourselves we eventually realize that there was never any such ‘gap’ in the first place! This is the Indian ideal of ‘moksha’ – becoming so pure that we identify with the spiritual more than the physical and find ourselves in the presence of God. As *Revelation 3:12* intones, “Thou shalt become a pillar in my temple and go out no more.” The wave fancies itself as being distinct from the ocean, but it is destined to melt back into it. So too are we destined to return the energy of our lives to whence it came.

The illusion that we’re separate from God serves a useful purpose, rather like the illusion that we’re separate from each other allows us to interact in meaningful ways. The irony is that the illusion of separation is designed to UNITE us! A mother beholds herself to be ‘separated’ from her baby once the umbilical cord is cut, but does the child disappear anywhere? On the contrary, it reunites with the mother of its

own volition and a more meaningful relationship replaces the engineered one. So too must we endure the illusion of being separated from our Divine Mother, but we are in error when we wander off as if she never existed. She is waiting for us to turn and embrace her of our own volition. This is the true definition of 'holy', for the creator and the created will be 'whole' again...

6. DIVIDE AND CONQUER

“What is hateful to yourself, do not to your fellow man.
That is the whole of the Torah. The remainder is but commentary.”

- Rabbi Hillel

With all these exotic interpretations of God, it's often said that the world's various faiths 'contradict' each other and that only one of them can be 'right' whereas all the others must be 'wrong'. Taking advantage of this schism, atheists smugly chime in that ALL belief systems are therefore erroneous. Contrary to popular belief, the differences between religions are few and trivial whereas their similarities are numerous and of profound significance. From my scholarly perspective, I see a solid backbone running throughout them all. In fact, I find it hard to separate them on any other grounds than time and place!

Hinduism is the world's oldest major religion (too old to even date), which in time also gave rise to Buddhism and Sikhism in Northern India. Meanwhile, Jewish patriarchs like Abraham and Moses independently stumbled upon the mysticism of Hinduism and harnessed it to found the movement that would become Judaism. Jesus emerged from this culture and nourished its dusty roots with the compassionate waters of Indian wisdom, which he seems to have been exposed to as a globe-trotting student. This unlikely marriage between motherly Hinduism and fatherly Judaism gave birth to an entirely new movement that we know as Christianity. Centuries later, the Prophet Muhammad sought to bring sanity to the barbarous tribes of Arabia and took inspiration from the Christians and Jews around him. He kept

what worked and questioned what didn't, pruning back the years of dogma and superstition that had plagued previous religions. This fertilized ovum then worked its way back into the womb of the Indian subcontinent to complete the circle of life.

Ever since that time, the fundamental unity of all religions has been plain to see and future spiritual leaders need only illustrate as much. It is for this reason that Muhammad is often referred to as the "Last Prophet". It doesn't necessarily mean that a man of God will never again walk the earth. It simply implies that everything we need to know about God has already been revealed. Only our ability to understand what has been revealed is at fault, and this is what any contemporary prophets are likely to address. We've already seen shades of it in the work of visionaries such as Mahatma Gandhi, who drew upon the teachings of ALL religious traditions.

Further to a shared history, it's even more important to establish that the world's various faiths enjoy a shared philosophy. We've already seen how their various concepts of God all point to the same divine energy. We've also heard the platitudes about the "Golden Rule" they share of treating others as we would want to be treated. In fact, there are hundreds of other aphorisms they have in common. But alas, it would not be possible to re-iterate them here without regurgitating the scriptures of every single faith! For now, I would like to set those clichés aside and explore some of the deeper and more significant connections.

Hindus define religion as "the art of reducing the suffering caused by ignorance." This is what every sincere religious movement on the planet truly has in common. It's also one of the reasons why atheists

are in grave error when they dismiss religions simply because they don't believe in the supernatural elements. Those stories point to something deeper that any intelligent mind would do well to contemplate. As *Surah 14* of the *Qur'an* sets out, "This is a book revealed that man might be led out of the depths of darkness and into the light." Or as Gandhi put it more succinctly, "The essence of religion is morality."

At the end of the day, all religions are about cultivating virtues and eliminating vices. The *Qur'an* concedes as much in *Surah 16*, which states that the message of every prophet was to "serve Allah and eschew evil." Since time immemorial, philosophers of every persuasion have agreed that this should be humanity's greatest aspiration. As Socrates offered, "The love of the Gods belongs to anyone who has given birth to virtue and nourished it. If any human being could become immortal, it would be he." It's what Aristotle referred to as 'flourishing'.

Even secular thinkers such as John Stuart Mill posited that happiness lies in 'higher' intellectual pursuits rather than 'lower' primitive impulses – and that a man would always choose the former when "competently acquainted with both." The problem is that they're not, and this is what religions seek to address when they extol the virtues of a moral existence. As we shall see in a later chapter dedicated to the issue of morality, this goes beyond the remit of atheism – which insists that happiness can only be derived from the material world and that a spiritual dimension is of limited importance.

Of course, some religions (and indeed people of any kind) disagree as to what exactly counts as a 'vice' or a 'virtue' – along with the

appropriate method of eliminating or cultivating them respectively. As we shall explore more fully in the next chapter, ‘meditation’ is the key to achieving this in the religious view. It’s often associated with Eastern religions, but it’s a little known fact that ALL religions employ it in some way. After all, being still and silent can bring clarity to the mind of any individual – even a cynical one!

This pursuit of purity even forms the backbone of L. Ron Hubbard’s much-derided cult of ‘Scientology’, made famous by Hollywood stars like Tom Cruise and John Travolta. The movement is often associated with ‘aliens’ and whatnot, but that’s just a defamatory urban myth. Scientology is actually interested in removing negative experiences from the memory known as ‘engrams’. Theoretically, the individual then becomes less agitated and more clear-minded (and is literally known as a ‘Clear’). It’s the equivalent of achieving ‘enlightenment’ through religious practices. But the method used is not meditation per se so much as a process called ‘auditing’, which is basically a glorified counselling session.

Although the routes to this desirable state of mind may raise eyebrows, there can be no denying that religions share a common purpose when properly understood as self-improvement on a grand scale. This is why atheists are in error when they question what role God or religion plays in a society where people are already ‘good’ by default. It’s not always about being ‘good’ to other people – it’s about being ‘good’ to YOURSELF! Being of assistance to other people is a natural by-product of perfecting yourself. Indeed, it is only truly possible once you have done that. It is for this reason that Jesus said “Seek ye first the kingdom of God” and “Be ye therefore perfect.” It

was his intention to create a society of enlightened individuals whose every action was inspired – not to create a handful of ‘nice’ people who do their bit for charity. The atheist is naturally excluded from being inspired by a God they don’t acknowledge the existence of. It’s like watching a TV that isn’t turned on! Or more accurately, staring at a blank space where a TV is supposed to be.

If there’s any credence to this diplomatic world view, we wonder why great teachers like Jesus and Buddha insisted that theirs was the “only way”. One of the most misunderstood lines in Christendom is, “I am the way... nobody comes to the father but by me.” It sounds like we’re being told that the human being called Jesus is the only one that should be listened to. But as we’ve already established in previous chapters, Jesus had long since dispensed of thinking of himself as human. Indeed, the moniker of ‘Christ’ doesn’t refer to a man so much as a QUALITY – a quality that Jesus possessed. So what he’s effectively saying is, “The qualities I possess are the ones that put you in tune with God.”

He was speaking from an enlightened state of unity with God (“The father and I are one”). Therefore, the statement is not restricted to his person – or even his time and place. That’s why the Buddha and others could say it with equal conviction without being wrong or mistaken. As the 15th *Surah* of the *Qur’an* points out, “The way of my servants is indeed a way that leads straight to me.” ENLIGHTENMENT is “the way”. Nobody develops a relationship with God but by IT. Quite how you achieve it is a matter of personal preference.

Alongside Christianity, Islam is often accused of confounding this potential unity. There are many passages in the *Qur'an* that seem hostile to prior faiths and require Islam alone to be embraced wholeheartedly. As we've already established in previous chapters, this is a paradox because 'Islam' as a concept has existed since the dawn of time! It merely refers to 'submitting' to the "one true God", Allah (the "one true God" being the same one that all others have a concept of). All mainstream religions purport to do this in one way or another, so Islam seeks to unite them in their impulse towards the divine and has little time for the divisive dogma that separates them. Muslims aren't required to reject all other faiths and embrace a strange new one. They're merely asked to rediscover the only religion that ever really existed. As *Surah 29:46* diplomatically puts it, "Remind them that their God is your God and we are all one."

In a similar vein, we often hear that it's impossible to 'leave' Islam as though it were some sort of sinister cult. The 16th *Surah* of the *Qur'an* elaborates on this with several verses that clarify that it is a 'covenant' with ALLAH that cannot be broken – as distinct from one with ISLAM itself as an exclusive new religion. It simply refers to the fact that a relationship with God – of any kind – should not be abandoned for arbitrary reasons after being carefully cultivated. A poetic verse likens it to "the unravelling strands of a rope that was once strong." Spirituality is the ideal being upheld, so it once again becomes a call for unity. The *Qur'an* is an argument against Godlessness more than anything else.

It's often said that the world's various religions are all "fingers on the same hand." If that's true then the hypothetical 'hand' is reaching

towards God and grasping for enlightenment. Not only are they connected but their goal is the same! And yet it is necessary to ‘separate’ those fingers on some level – as surely as our individual digits allow us to do great work. As we saw in the previous chapter, separation need not be as negative as it appears. After all, separated entities enjoy the freedom to come together of their own volition.

This perhaps explains the perceived differences between religions. As the *Qur’an* repeatedly points out, “Each nation is sent a prophet to make things clear in their own language.” The world’s various faiths are understandings of God that happened to arise at different times and in different places. Their apparent differences are as natural as our differences in language and appearance. It has more to do with culture than philosophy. Far from being a negative thing, this merely means that each faith was tailored to the community it purported to serve. A prophet they can relate to arises to solve problems they have in ways that work for them. Socrates would have endorsed this approach because he felt that a discourse had to be tailored to the intended audience. The simple fact is that in previous centuries one size did NOT fit all. Only now, as technology makes the world smaller, can we rise above these cultural differences and put the pieces of the puzzle back together.

Whenever we encounter an odd rule or an apparent contradiction in scripture, we must ask ourselves what kind of virtue it is trying to cultivate or what kind of vice it is trying to eliminate. As St Augustine always maintained, “You haven’t understood a verse until it establishes the reign of charity.” This is also why *Surah 49:6* of the *Qur’an* implores us to “ascertain the truth lest ye harm people unwittingly.”

This thirst for righteousness is the uniting factor that can bond any one religion to the other. The trivial details are irrelevant by comparison. Fasting, for instance, is all about self-restraint within yourself and empathy for those less fortunate. Meanwhile, prayer is all about thinking before you act and humbly acknowledging a higher power (even if you believe that “higher power” is nature rather than God).

I once knew a girl who mocked religious people that said ‘grace’ before a meal, which I never quite understood because it’s a harmless moment of reflection. Surely even the most cynical individual can appreciate the science of what has gone into the food on their plate and how fortunate they are to be enjoying it? It’s a simple matter of human decency – not a religious issue! In their haste to distance themselves from religion, people often stray into dark territory. They’re so very proud of their ‘intelligent’ stance and yet there’s often so very little to be proud of.

The important thing is the END, whereas organized religion tends to attach too much importance to the ‘means’ to the end. Arguing about how many times per day one should pray is like a team of scientists arguing as to when they should take a tea break! It really is of limited importance, and may even do more harm than good. As St Paul pleads at *1 Corinthians 7:5*, “Don’t refuse one another in order to give yourselves to prayer or fasting.” Common sense and priorities remain important throughout any religious practice. It’s what Islamic mystics refer to as the “inner reality” (*haqiqah*) as opposed to the “outer law” (*shari’ah*). Although the latter is important, it becomes nonsensical without the former. This is exactly how Jesus admonished hypocritical Jews at *Matthew 23:23*, “You perform rituals but have omitted the

weightier matters of justice and mercy. You should have achieved these things without leaving the others undone.”

This formula even applies to seemingly reprehensible commandments such as the ‘stoning’ we see in Islam and Judaism. The argument isn’t that stoning people is great and that all civilized societies should do it. It’s all about priorities. The wisdom is, “If you’re going to stone somebody for anything, stone them for THIS.” The ‘means’ of stoning is secondary to the ‘end’ of having your priorities straight. The infamous teaching of “an eye for an eye” is another example of this. It has nothing to do with vengeful bloodlust. On the contrary, the whole point was to PREVENT an endless cycle of bloodshed! The sentiment is “this far and no further”. It was a bridge from barbarity to civility (albeit not one we would recognize today). As the *Qur’an* assures us, the ideal is to mercifully forgo revenge instead of revelling in it.

We have to appreciate that Moses and Muhammad were trying to rein back centuries of barbarism. As Moses repeatedly wailed, “Why have I been given this corrupt generation?!” They grudgingly made concessions as they chipped away at centuries of primitive thinking. As Jesus acknowledged, “Moses wrote the law on stone but I have come to write it on the hearts of men.” Their compassionate ideals are the same – only the circumstances in which they had to work are different.

Where deep philosophical differences do occur, it has more to do with fallible followers than the original teachings. It’s often said that all the world’s religious icons would agree on everything if placed in a room together, whereas all their disciples would DISAGREE about everything in the same scenario! This is most plain to see in the

exchanges between Jesus and the hypocritical Jewish priests he sought to reform. As he regularly pointed out, his quarrel wasn't with Moses or Judaism. He remained proudly Jewish himself. His quarrel was with those who had misunderstood Judaism and made it unnecessarily complicated (or those who had wilfully diluted it to appease others). It is human insecurity that takes an honourable religion and turns into something self-serving and grotesque.

We also see this throughout the *Qur'an*, as Muhammad seeks to reform the dogmatic pagans around him. As with Jesus and Judaism, it wasn't his intention to create a 'new' religion so much as purify the impulse towards God that already existed. Indeed, the beauty of Islam is that it claims to have ALWAYS existed – defying the restrictions of time and place. He didn't see his movement as being any different from Judaism proper or Christianity proper. His quarrel was only with the fallible humans who had misrepresented those faiths. Indeed, the *Qur'an* is replete with stories from the *Bible* and those prophets are ranked among the greatest of them all. If Christianity is Judaism PLUS Jesus then Islam is Christianity PLUS Muhammad. They share an unbreakable backbone. Perhaps that is the real "Holy Trinity"!

One of the most astute observations that the *Qur'an* makes about religious history is that the old always hates the new. The biblical story of Cain killing his virtuous younger brother, Abel, is portrayed in this manner. As is the story of Joseph being persecuted by his older brothers, the lowly shepherd boy David supplanting King Saul on the throne, and Jesus being rejected by the Jewish authorities who should have embraced him the most. The spotlight then falls on Muhammad himself, who was being similarly persecuted for instigating change. Each new

religion is rejected by the last – not because it is ‘wrong’ but because the latter refuses to adapt. Indeed, they CANNOT because they’ve cultivated a scenario where they have too much to lose. After all, turkeys don’t vote for Christmas! One of the problems with organized religion is that it freezes a moment in time and solidifies a philosophy that was meant to be fluid. This lack of flexibility is also one of the reasons that the ‘new’ threat of science is confronted like an enemy. It needn’t be seen that way, as surely as each religion needn’t be threatened by the existence of another. Only insecurity endows a positive thing with a negativity it never possessed.

In the irony to end all ironies, self-proclaimed ‘Christians’ would probably be the first to persecute Christ if he ever returned. That’s assuming they even recognize him in the first place! The problem with having strict expectations is that the chances of an individual satisfying them are pretty slim. We’ve already seen this in the way Jews struggled to make sense of their own prophet, Jesus. This conflict of interests is the crux of Dostoevsky’s play, *The Inquisition*, which envisages the Catholic Church taking exception to a Messiah who threatens to supplant their power. Seriously, what would happen if Christ really DID return to public life? Would the thousands of clergymen throughout the world really slip out of their robes and trot home with smiles on their faces as they retrain to do something else for a living? No, it is of course in their interests to deny that anyone remotely comparable to Christ will ever walk the earth again.

For this reason, I doubt much would change even if he did. As we were saying about the prospect of God’s existence being obvious, it would practically defeat the purpose. It will always be possible to reject

prophets (as surely as God herself) and we must put up with the fallible humans that choose to do so. Ironically, it seems the differences between religions have more to do with REJECTING faith than embracing it! In this sense, an insincere believer is scarcely better than an atheist. Neither are free of the ego and neither have a correct understanding of God. Instead of criticizing fundamentalists as if they were oddities, atheists should see their ugly reflection within them.

Of course, for every atheist that seizes on the contradictory differences between religions there are some who are all too eager to concede that faiths are ‘united’ – united in their corrupt falsehood! In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins delights in recounting tales of cults that have a religious subtext. We hear about John Frum, who abused his civilized knowledge and plentiful resources to make himself a ‘God’ amongst impressionable Third World tribes. He was hailed as some sort of ‘Messiah’ and a primitive religion was built up around him. Rather predictably, Dawkins implies that ALL religious movements are similarly vacuous. They’re all sustained by a potent cocktail of intellectual abuse, misunderstandings, and a convenient lack of detail.

There is indeed a connection between cults and mainstream religions, but it’s not the religions that are based on cults – it’s the cults that are based on religions! In the cynical view, corrupt cults came first and each new religion is merely a variation of this intellectual crime. The truth is that sincere religions came first and tawdry cults sought to emulate their qualities. They do so clumsily, of course, and very few of these ‘qualities’ remain intact. It seems clear to me that this is the difference between cults and religions. I doubt that the words of “John

Frum” and his ilk were touched with the same genius that mainstream religions cherish in their prophets! For all their apparent superstitions, religions have a deep philosophical dimension that is hard to replicate. As the *Qur'an* repeatedly challenges cynics, “If this is a work of fiction, why can’t you compose better verses?”

Like the sun in our solar system, there is only ONE source of light. The world’s various religions and philosophies are the planets that orbit that one light. Although some are closer than others, each receives its own portion of light and no one contains it all at any one time. But that which receives light also casts a shadow. This is the dark side of religion that cynics are so quick to mistake for the real thing. A veil of darkness says nothing about the substantial planet underneath, nor is darkness its natural state. It’s merely a temporary by-product of being ‘enlightened’...

7. MY GOD

“Examine your thoughts for 24 hours and
wonder no more at God’s existence.”

- *Sri Yukteswar*

We’ve already started to chip away at some of the reasons people assume that God does NOT exist. At this juncture, I should perhaps elaborate on why I believe there IS a God. I would even go so far as to say that I know for a fact that this is so. When asked if I ‘believe’ in God, I often feel like insisting that ‘belief’ isn’t a big enough word! It implies some sort of ‘blind’ belief in something that may not be so, whereas religious conviction is firmly rooted in evidence of a kind. As Os Guinness noted, “Faith does not feed on thin air but on facts.”

The problem is that these experiences remain entirely subjective and are difficult to articulate to others. As Plato conceded, “To find the maker of this universe is hard enough, and even if I succeeded to declare him to everyone is impossible.” I know all too well that there’s nothing I can say to convince an atheist or agnostic of God’s existence. I wouldn’t even bother under normal circumstances, but I suspect I don’t have the luxury of choice in a project like this.

One of the advantages I feel I bring to this debate is that I’ve been both an atheist AND a believer. I know how the atheist feels because I’ve thought his thoughts. I know everything he knows PLUS religious insight. He doesn’t know everything I know ‘plus’ cynicism! Or should that be ‘minus’ given that cynicism is such a drain on human potential? This is the one subject that even roused Gandhi’s ire, causing him to remark, “Atheism has no effect on me because I have already crossed

that particular desert.” Cynics often assume that their beloved atheism is some sort of revelation that religious people have never had the good fortune to encounter before. On the contrary, they are all too familiar with it. If anything, it is the atheist who has a poor understanding of religion. The average atheist is brought up in a particular faith which they then reject as an adult (with great cathartic relish). This invariably means that their understanding of it never progresses beyond that of a child, and their judgment remains clouded for the rest of their life. As the Russian priest Alexander Elchaninov conceded, “There are many people to whom the Gospels mean nothing because they recall being ‘bored’ by them in childhood.”

It was the other way around for me. Although my mother was somewhat religious and I was exposed to Christianity, I never took it seriously as a cynical teenager (except for a morbid fascination with Jesus’ crucifixion). As an adult, I returned to religion on my own terms and discovered a philosophical value I never knew it had. I shudder to think what would have become of me had I failed to do so.

Digging back into the dark depths of my atheistic mind, I recall that it seemed obvious that there was no such thing as God or miracles. I certainly never saw either! Or did I? We assume our senses serve us well, but the information they deliver is only as good as the mind that interprets it. If you hand me a series of Chinese characters, I will declare it to be nonsense – but someone who can read Chinese would protest that there is a message to be heard. In this manner, we must also learn to read the language of life.

I certainly sense a poetry to existence – one that defies ‘chance’ and goes beyond ‘coincidence’. An ex-girlfriend and I were blessed by

so many coincidences that we joked it was a pastime called ‘coinciding’! It’s what the Chinese refer to more sensibly as ‘mo qi’ – that charming synchronicity that makes life feel like a scripted movie. In this view, everything does indeed “happen for a reason”. The odd incident may be explained away as a ‘coincidence’, but a persistent barrage of such incidents demands deeper understanding. Quite frankly, if there’s nothing more to life than meets the eye then mine has enjoyed a million coincidences in a row! I could have won the lottery ten times over against such odds. I certainly feel that wealthy – albeit not in the mundane, material sense.

There are so many strange occurrences in my life that I’ve even taken to keeping a record of them lest I become complacent or ungrateful. Perhaps that means I’m ‘looking’ for them now and they’re duty-bound to appear. But the fact remains that it wouldn’t have occurred to me in the first place if I hadn’t already encountered them independently.

I appreciate that this is beginning to smack of ‘delusion’, and we shall explore that more fully in the next chapter. But for now it suffices to say that ‘delusion’ is seldom positive (unless you’re deluded that something is positive when it isn’t!). This is the argument put forward repeatedly in the *Bible* and the *Qur’an*. When Moses is accused of being nothing more than a ‘sorcerer’ by a sceptical Pharaoh, his succinct response is that “sorcery does not prosper”. He wasn’t alluding to material prosperity so much as the fact that every action he took was inspired and fruitful.

It’s an argument that Muhammad himself would go on to use when his detractors in Mecca accused him of being mental. He was

extraordinarily successful on a number of levels, and turned the smallest of molehills into the biggest of mountains. If he wasn't a religious figure his achievements would be enshrined in secular history like those of Gandhi. We also see these baseless accusations of delusion in the *New Testament* when Jesus is accused of being some sort of deranged 'devil'. He points out that this is inconsistent with the positive effect he is having on his community, remarking that "a house divided amongst itself would fall."

For my own part, I have enjoyed a lot of prosperity that I would ascribe to a higher power. Within months of acknowledging the existence of God, I fulfilled my childhood dream of making computer games for a living. I then proceeded to run my own business for 10 years in remarkable circumstances – doing the work of an entire office block full of people single-handedly without breaking a sweat. I also seemed to master everything else I cared to turn my hand to. I suddenly acquired a robust level of fitness that I had always aspired to as a skinny teenager, I taught myself how to play the piano within a couple of weeks, I began cooking effortlessly by eye, and even took to cutting my own hair! As this latest tome testifies, I also consumed a library of knowledge and developed the eloquence to write a handful of published books.

I sense a definite connection between my thoughts and my reality. Everything I think of comes to pass on some level. Indeed, I'm quite prepared to dismiss all of the above as the natural by-product of a positive, pro-active mind. After all, devout atheists have enjoyed even more success! But I consider mine to be 'spiritual' achievements rather than 'material' ones. Any financial rewards they yielded are secondary

to the fulfilment they gave me. Creativity and achievement are constant ‘ends’ in themselves – the ‘means’ are almost irrelevant, which is why I can attach so much significance to something as tawdry as making games or writing books.

There’s a “Holy Trinity” of inspiration, determination, and expression that cycles throughout any endeavour – no matter what it entails. I credit God (or my soul) with all three. We assume that God speaks to mankind in a thunderous voice, but profound ‘inspiration’ is her greatest tool. Indeed, this is the term we see repeatedly throughout the *Qur’an*. An imaginative idea comes out of nowhere and grips the mind, it is given credence by the faithful individual, and then comes to fruition with the most remarkable consequences. We saw this triumvirate in my spiritual appraisal of evolution – God kick-starts the process, sustains it, and is the perfection towards which it aspires. There is no endeavour that God’s light does not seek to shine through.

For me, this line of thinking led to a profound belief in ‘destiny’. Indeed, that was my first concept of God because I was forced to contemplate who presides over such things and for what reason? If one person has a destiny then we must ALL have a destiny, because our experiences are moulded into shape by those of others. Indeed, that’s arguably what destiny is. Even the fluttering of a butterfly is said to have repercussions that affect the rest of the world! The dichotomy is that not everyone likes to think they’re guided by fate. As Neo protests in *The Matrix*, “I don’t like the idea that I’m not in control of my own life.”

Destiny needn’t be seen in these fatalistic terms. At the risk of contradicting myself, I believe in a malleable destiny that can be

controlled. Consider a hose pipe gushing out water in a steady stream. It is the water's 'destiny' to travel in the direction it is aimed, and yet its direction can be changed at any time! Likewise, our collective thoughts and actions are setting the tone for our lives – and yet the trajectory can be adjusted at any moment. I believe that our lives pan out more smoothly when we acknowledge the existence of a higher power and bend to its will. As the Islamic scholar Abdullah Yusuf Ali put it, "Religion is the desire of the soul to know and understand Allah's will, and act in accordance therewith." Indeed, this is exactly what the Islamic ideal of 'submission' entails. It's like swimming with the flow instead of against it. That effortless progress is what passes for a favourable 'destiny'. We may be given a path to walk, but it's up to us to stride confidently down it instead of staggering from side to side like spiritual drunkards.

In a heated philosophical debate, my uncle once insisted that the events of our lives are pre-determined to the extent that a movie is etched onto a DVD. Riffing on his analogy, I agreed there was a 'director' and a 'script' – but I countered that it was a LIVE theatrical performance, full of risk and spontaneity! As William Shakespeare put it, "All the world's a stage. There are no small parts – only small actors." I certainly see life as a script that's constantly being written and re-written – albeit not to the extent that the original 'plot' is lost. I pride myself on being able to 'read' this potential masterpiece – to see where things are going and what they're meant to achieve. Most people seek to cancel the production once they encounter a dark scene or a dark character. They would do well to persevere and see what dramatic conclusions those episodes are setting up.

Sometimes I cannot sleep at night because I am so excited about what I will achieve the next day. As corny as that sounds, there can be no denying that it is a positive state of affairs. If nothing else, one thing I've noticed about my spiritual transformation is that the number of things that make me happy have increased whereas those that make me unhappy have decreased. If that's not the meaning of life then I don't know what is! I've always maintained that the greatest night of my life was spent sitting alone in the dark next to a Christmas tree. It gave a whole new meaning to the term "Christmas presence"! That may sound odd, but imagine being THAT easily pleased. Life becomes a constant barrage of profoundly positive experiences.

My friends and family often imply that I'm 'deluded', which strikes me as being deeply unreasonable. Of all the people to accuse of 'delusion', why pick on the most intelligent, successful, and graceful person in the room? I don't say that out of arrogance, but there must surely be better candidates for delusion than me. My family is littered with alcoholics, adulterers, gluttons, egotists, and dim-witted failures. They're not 'deluded' in the slightest whereas I am? If that's humanity operating at the highest level then you can keep it! If being me is wrong, I don't want to be right.

It seems it's OK to worship at the altar of anything EXCEPT God. Those that are enslaved by materialism and egotism behold themselves to be so very sensible, whereas the liberated spiritual master is deemed to be so very mistaken. It's especially jarring for me since I have a sound understanding of all the world's major belief systems (including secular ones), whereas my accusers have seldom read the scriptures that displease them so. It's hard to take ignorant criticism seriously. As

Pocahontas sang to her arrogant oppressor, “If the savage one is me, how can there be so much that you don’t know?”

The irony is that God’s existence isn’t even up for discussion. Her existence is obvious – it simply isn’t obvious to the individual who doesn’t know how or where to look. A caged bird may protest that it is impossible to fly, but that doesn’t make it so. There is a life outside of his material confines that he has yet to experience. As far as humans are concerned, ‘meditation’ is the key to unlocking that hypothetical prison. Upon doing so, the individual not only improves their prospects but they also come face to face with the deity whose existence is in question. Through meditation, it is possible to tap into a profound energy that fits the description of God. We assume that God is some sort of thundering monster that stomps onto the scene, but the reality is that she’s a delicate butterfly that only descends on you when you are still and quiet. As *Psalm 46:10* intones, “Be still and know that I am God.”

There’s nothing especially ‘paranormal’ about this. It stands to reason that your senses become heightened when you are motionless and silent. You become aware of every little sound and sensation – right down to the blood coursing through your veins and the energy jostling within your fibres. For my own part, I can even turn the simple process of breathing in and out into an intensely pleasurable experience! But chief among these sensations is a captivating humming noise that emanates from the back of the skull, where the “medulla oblongata” is located. This is the proverbial “mouth of God” that Jesus spoke of, and the hypothetical ‘words’ that gush forth from it are ones of profound inspiration. The individual becomes aware that they are more than just

a body. They can palpably feel that the atoms of their body are synonymous with those of everyone and everything around them. They emerge from the experience with an extraordinary sense of calm and serenity. Paradoxically, this calm individual also enjoys a heightened state of awareness and assumes a positive role in the outside world – rather like a finely tuned string that is ready to play its part in a masterpiece.

We assume that meditation is an exclusively Eastern practice, but it's actually the backbone of all the major religions – even Judaism and Christianity. In one of the most shamefully misunderstood verses in the *New Testament*, Jesus gives us an erudite endorsement of meditation. *Luke 11:34* in the time-honoured *King James* version reads, “The eye is the lamp of the body. If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.” Modern translations have recklessly assumed that the line refers to one's vision being ‘healthy’, but LIGHT is actually the key term here. What Jesus is saying is that the two physical eyes are like spotlights that shine out into the world and give the brain something to think about. If one CLOSES the eyes and turns those spotlights inward to form ONE light (“thine eye be single”), we can then explore our psychological make-up and weigh up the balance of positive character traits versus negative ones. And the beauty of the saying is that with the very same ‘light’ we can incinerate any negative tendencies that are exposed – thus allowing positive qualities to prevail (“thy whole body shall be full of light”).

This is also the subtext of one of the more infamous episodes of Jesus' story, where he chases the merchants out of the temple. It's significant that he goes on to liken the ‘temple’ to the human body. The

implication is that he's chasing negative qualities (specifically materialism) out of the human experience. He declares, "This is my Father's house (this is where positivity is supposed to reign), but you have turned it into a den of thieves (you have allowed negative tendencies to prevail)." The dramatic events of his life were designed to mirror the transformation that people were being asked to go through. His life was quite literally his message.

Given that "a tree is known by its fruit," it's heartening that we see Jesus' more accomplished followers keeping this tradition alive. Over 1'000 years later, St Francis of Assisi could also be found immersing himself in deep meditation. Thomas of Celano's biography relates, "He made himself insensible to the clamour of all outward things and checked all his outward senses by an immense effort of will." We also hear how the nuns that followed St Francis benefited from this practice, "They are fortunate enough to be able to experience union with God in spiritual ecstasy as they persist night and day in prayer."

Meditation, and indeed religion itself, is designed to purify the individual to such an extent that they naturally gravitate towards divinity – whereupon God's existence is obvious, because you are part of it and it is part of you. The problem is that this experience remains entirely subjective and cannot be articulated to others. I liken it to playing the piano. A guest at my house may stab at the keys and protest that it's 'impossible' to play. I confidently assure them it is, drawing on my own personal experience, but there's nothing I can do to instantly pass on a knowledge and skill that took years to acquire. Spiritual mastery is the same. It takes a lot of time and effort to peel back the layers of mortality and let divinity shine through. It's of no avail when

a cynic closes their eyes for a few minutes and declares, “Nope, nothing there.” It’s like tossing a seed into a heap of soil and demanding to see its fruit! Nothing worth achieving is ever easy.

Of course, there is also the prospect of ‘delusion’ to contend with again. Meditation may indeed facilitate an enjoyably positive experience, but that doesn’t preclude it from being a trick of the mind or a natural by-product of manipulating the senses. Indeed, many secular people have reaped the benefits of yoga and relaxation techniques. In the case of religious people, it could very well be a self-fulfilling prophecy brought about by the desire to feel special.

Personally, I don’t feel that level of cynicism is warranted. None of these experiences may mean much in isolation, but they gain credence when each one backs up the other. They gain further credence when they are corroborated by the experiences of others that are documented in scripture and other testimonies. It’s what Gandhi famously referred to as “experiments with truth”. Religious people don’t believe what they’re told without question. They put it into practice and its value becomes apparent – like a recipe book that delivers exactly what it promises (in the hands of a competent chef at least!).

This is certainly where my religious conviction comes from. I arrived at many of my beliefs independently and then saw them validated beyond doubt by hundreds of other sources – past and present. It became increasingly obvious to me that there’s more to life than meets the eye and that a man can better his prospects by acknowledging that fact. As they say, if something looks like a duck, sounds like a duck, and acts like a duck... it’s probably a duck! Likewise, when God’s existence is screaming out to you in stereo, it’s more likely than

not that there's something worth hearing. As the *Qur'an* repeatedly points out, "There are signs for those who pay attention."

Sometimes people go to more effort to convince themselves that something ISN'T true than to simply accept that it is. Some of the conspiracy theories that cynics subscribe to are more far-fetched than anything claimed in the *Bible*! As we shall, it's actually counter-intuitive to assume that God doesn't exist so we shouldn't veer in that direction quite so easily. There may not be irrefutable 'proof' of God's existence, but there's more than enough 'evidence' to make it a sensible hypothesis. Atheists are in error when they vilify religious people for investigating it...

8. THE GOD DELUSION

“The mind is like a parachute – it works best when it is open.”

- James Twyman

In 2006, the biologist Richard Dawkins announced himself on the world stage with *The God Delusion* – his argument as to why a belief in God shouldn't persist into the 21st century and beyond. It captured the public's imagination (especially in a sceptical UK) and went on to be extraordinarily successful. He was saying what a lot of people were thinking, as it became increasingly clear that there was something not quite right about religion in the wake of 9/11 and other atrocities. “It's finally official that God doesn't exist,” people reasoned, “It's all there in that book that scientist wrote.”

In the irony to end all ironies, they took this man as their Messiah and revered his book as infallible scripture – right down to failing to read the damn thing and settling for the basic gist! For if they had read it carefully, they would have been rather less convinced. I like Richard Dawkins as a person. I think he's gentle, intelligent, and has a contagious enthusiasm for life on this planet. He's also a fine writer and *The God Delusion* is well put together. I even agree with much of what he says. I simply disagree with the conclusions he comes to – namely that God does not exist and religion is without merit. I'm afraid it's the work of a scientist straying far outside his comfort zone (not to mention his remit), and chapter after chapter comes unstuck on a philosophical level.

When I first heard the title “God Delusion”, I rather hoped it would refer to the ‘delusion’ that God does NOT exist! Needless to say, I was somewhat disappointed. I may sound flippant, but that’s exactly what ‘delusion’ means in Eastern philosophy – the delusion that there’s nothing more to life than the physical. Hindus even have a specific term for this kind of ignorance – ‘avidya’, which translates as an “absence of understanding” as to how things really are. It also refers to the stubborn refusal to address such a negative character trait. There could be no better word to sum up the scourge of atheism!

As we shall see in a later chapter, the crux of atheism is egotism (in every sense of the word). Not only does the cynical mind have enormous regard for its own fallible appraisal of the outside world, but it also remains looking outside of itself for satisfaction. This is what passes for ‘delusion’ in the religious view. Philosophically speaking, atheism is a deeply materialistic world view which questions the value of anything that ISN’T material. The irony is that science is constantly exposing the material world to be an illusion! Anything that is tangible can be broken down into increasingly ‘intangible’ sub-atomic components. This suggests that the materialist’s regard for the physical is somewhat misplaced. They behold an ‘illusion’ to be the only thing that’s real, which is practically the dictionary definition of ‘delusion’!

Like a cuckolded husband, the deluded materialist is then abused by the unworthy object of his desire. In the absence of anything else, he resigns himself to deriving pleasure from the physical alone. This is what concerns religions, because they are united in their belief that true happiness comes from REVERSING this trend rather than encouraging it.

Buddhism teaches that all human suffering stems from irrational desires, which is observably true. Cast your mind back to the last time you were upset and you can bet a desire of some description went unfulfilled – even if it was the understandable desire to avoid death or harm. Happiness dictates that we reduce the number of these triggers (or at least deploy them more wisely), whereas the materialist positively encourages us to deploy them with self-destructive abandon. The result is that the matter-intoxicated sense-slave staggers from one shard of glass to the other, mistaking each one for a jewel that will bring happiness. It seems materialism promises everything and delivers nothing. Religion, on the other hand, promises nothing but delivers everything! Atheists are indeed ‘deluded’ when they gamble their lives on a misery-making philosophy.

This is the sad thing about drug addiction and other vices in our increasingly godless society. Sense-enslaved materialists are killing themselves (and others) trying to attain something that comes naturally! An atheistic world view encourages them to look OUSTIDE of themselves for a sense of peace that they always had within. Like a dog chasing its tail, it’s a game they can never win and only increases the insanity that fuels their actions. As the Duke of Devonshire warned back in the 19th century, a civilization that destroys its churches better start building more prisons and lunatic asylums! It would have been funny if he hadn’t been proved right in recent decades.

I’ve seen this for myself in the classrooms of the UK. The students can often be heard protesting that this or that is ‘boring’. I used to think it was a valid criticism and that teachers were not doing enough to engage them. But then I realized that what they were really saying was,

“I only respond to sense stimulation. Nothing else has any value.” It’s a sinister world view for our children to have if you think about it. In the absence of a spiritual dimension to life, they have given so much credence to the senses that nothing else gives them pleasure. It’s what St Augustine denounced as ‘concupiscence’. It’s no coincidence that our children have become excessively sexual in such an environment. They are led to believe that sensuality is the only reality and duly proceed to act like animals. They don’t behold themselves to be ‘alive’ unless their heads are filled with electronic noises and their eyes are hypnotized by dancing images. Serenity is something to be avoided rather than embraced! In Indian philosophy, this is known as ‘vikarna’ – a distaste for that which is good for you. It’s rather like when children spit out vegetables. But of course, they are in error when they do so and we must confront their ignorance.

The irony is that the senses are an obstacle to lasting happiness. I know for a fact that the stillness of meditation offers the exact same ‘high’ that drug addicts and sense-slaves claim to be looking for. The only difference is that it costs nothing and the side effects are extraordinarily positive! After a few minutes of being still and silent behind closed eyes, the individual is overwhelmed by a sense of serenity as the energy of their body melts into that of their surroundings – allowing moments of inspiration to dominate the mind. It’s like a musical masterpiece that requires silence to be heard.

John Stuart Mill maintained that a man would always choose ‘higher’ pleasures over primitive ‘lower’ pleasures if he was “competently acquainted with both”. The problem is that they’re not, and an anti-religious regime will only ever perpetuate that regrettable

state of affairs. Ultimately, a man's resistance to vices is commensurate with the respect he has for himself. Somebody that's at peace with their mind has no desire to "get out of it", and somebody that enjoys good health has no wish to throw it away. In that sense, the body really is a 'temple' – the recipient of the respect we show to ourselves. It's just a shame that atheists have so little regard for 'temples' that they can't even look after their own!

I appreciate that not all atheists are self-destructive 'materialists' in the crude sense. They are of course perfectly capable of being 'spiritual' in their own way. Perhaps even more so than their pious counterparts! They would certainly counter that religious believers are the 'deluded' ones. Everything I offered up in the previous chapter would make me a prime candidate for such accusations. I suspect the word 'delusion' is thrown around a little too easily by both parties. It has profound implications that should be explored here.

For a start, it's a negative term that implies the individual's life is malfunctioning as a result of their erroneous beliefs. As I illustrated, we've seen how this is true of atheistic delusion. A man who looks to the physical world for satisfaction heightens his chances of becoming an immoral, self-destructive materialist with more vices than virtues. A misguided religious faith yields similarly destructive results when the individual becomes judgmental and intolerant. When in the grip of a cult, he may even self-destruct by sacrificing his resources and sanity for the cause.

But this is an argument against 'religion' of the dubious kind, as practiced by an insincere or unworthy individual. I would counter that no such ill effects are to be found in the original ambassadors of the

world's major faiths. If we denounce them as being as 'deluded' as their followers, it's hard to reconcile that with the fact that they were profoundly wise and graceful. As Jesus retorted to those who accused him of being in league with the devil, "A house divided amongst itself cannot stand." The possibility of him being 'deluded' or 'evil' was inconsistent with the positive effect he was having on his community.

Similarly, when Moses was accused of peddling nonsense by the sceptical Egyptians, his blunt response was that "sorcery does not prosper." He wasn't referring to 'prosperity' in the vulgar material sense so much as one's actions being inspired and fruitful. This is also the argument beloved of Muhammad, who himself led a successful campaign to change the course of history. The religious life tends to pan out in a remarkable way – even if it ends in martyrdom, as in the case of Jesus. Sometimes it's more 'deluded' to overlook these achievements than to simply accept that they were inspired! The *Qur'an* makes the point that when a man accuses you of 'lying' or being 'deluded', it says more about him than you. It means he "deals in falsehood" and sees everything through that negative prism. Accusations of 'delusion' fall so easily from the lips of atheists because they themselves are in the thrall of it.

A lot of secular criticisms are "self-referentially incoherent" and do more to destabilize atheism than support it. A theory beloved of Richard Dawkins and his ilk is that religion is some sort of "mind virus" that humanity would do well to be free from (which, rather chillingly, was also how Hitler saw it). Again, the term 'virus' is needlessly antagonistic and implies that religion is some sort of marauding force of negativity – which clearly doesn't do its positive

effects justice. As Nancey Murphy retorts, “Religion is a virus? I wish it could be spread that easily!” But more importantly, the idea that the human mind can somehow fall prey to such a ‘virus’ is just as much an argument against atheism. If the human mind is capable of ‘imagining’ there’s a God when there isn’t one, surely it’s equally capable of ‘imagining’ that there ISN’T a God when there IS? If we accept that it’s possible for humans to be deluded, then atheists must concede that it’s possible for themselves to be in the thrall of such a defect. Indeed, the evidence suggests that they most certainly are.

The former Archbishop William Temple tells a poignant anecdote about how he was once accused of “believing what he believes because of the way he was brought up.” His damning response was that his accuser believes he “believes what he believes because of the way he was brought up” because of the way HE was brought up! The cynic is just as brainwashed as any religious fanatic. They too have unsubstantiated opinions. The difference is that theirs are negative and hostile, whereas religious views tend to be humble and innocent. As Socrates would say, the victim of persecution has side-stepped ignorance and egoism and “in this at least is wise”.

It’s a “genetic fallacy” to assume that we can dismiss something just because we know how it arises. It’s possible for a religious individual to “believe what he believes because of the way he was brought up” AND it’s possible for those inherited beliefs to be valid. Indeed, we exhibit good manners “because of the way we are brought up” – but it doesn’t follow that we are somehow wrong to do so!

Similarly, God is often dismissed as an “imaginary friend” that we carry into adulthood (in what is known as “paedo-morphosis”). Not

only is this a flawed analogy because a deity is more than an arbitrary “play mate”, but it’s also of no consequence because something being ‘childish’ has no bearing on its validity. On the contrary, children can often be more perceptive than world-weary adults!

As a teacher, I’ve often seen young students grasp ethical concepts more successfully than their older counterparts. In a discussion about ‘forgiveness’, the older students dismissed it as a ‘weak’ character trait – whereas an unassuming little girl observed that it’s a sign a strength because it’s “hard to do”. There’s a difference between academic ‘intelligence’ and spiritual ‘intelligence’. Wisdom is not always about ‘acquiring’ knowledge. It might very well be that we are born with it and must strive to preserve it. It is for this reason that Jesus was adamant that “nobody enters the kingdom of God unless he becomes like a child.”

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins argues that it’s irresponsible to label a child a ‘Christian’ or a ‘Muslim’ because they’re too young to hold such beliefs. He compares it to labelling a child a ‘Marxist’ or a ‘Conservative’, which is indeed absurd! It’s a seductive analogy and I almost subscribed to it myself, but the reality is that religious beliefs are quite distinct from political beliefs. A political opinion does indeed require intelligence and experience. An impulse towards morality and the divine, however, is rather more universal and should indeed be encouraged from a young age – just not in a sectarian way.

Another example of this excessive cynicism is when a belief in God or an afterlife is dismissed as “wishful thinking” – which doesn’t preclude it from being true. I may fondly ‘wish’ that there is an afterlife

and it might very well come to pass – as surely as I might ‘wish’ for a team to win a game of football. My vain desire doesn’t reduce their chances of winning to zero! And again, we might very well accuse atheists of “wishfully thinking” that God DOESN’T exist. For many immoral individuals, this is a favourable state of affairs that allows them to do what they want with impunity. Indeed, that’s precisely why their minds are so quick to veer in that direction.

The scientific argument against this line of reasoning is that man has ‘evolved’ to believe in things that don’t exist and to see meaning where there is none. Daniel Dennett posits that we are predisposed to see the world in terms of ‘design’ because it makes our lives easier. Upon encountering a tiger, for instance, it doesn’t serve us to over-analyze the beast! Instead we must quickly attach all manner of significance to it and act based on those assumptions. This implies that our genetic history is littered with false assumptions that we have neglected to shed. We’ve become accustomed to seeking out purpose instead of analyzing things rationally.

As convincing as this hypothesis is, it still has no bearing on God’s existence or the validity of religion. We may have evolved to give credence to our assumptions AND some of those assumptions may be valid. If anything, religion supports the idea that our instincts and senses cannot be trusted and that we must appeal to a higher faculty to deduce the truth. They simply disagree that the ‘truth’ involves God not existing.

The psychologist Sigmund Freud put forth all manner of pseudo-scientific arguments as to why God is a figment of the human imagination. Chief among them was his theory of “ancestor worship”,

which dictates that primitive man felt the need to supplant the leader of a tribe out of envious self-interest – and then idolized the fallen patriarch out of guilt. This unworthy object of worship is known as the “Super Ego” and passes for what we know as God. Rather baselessly, Freud implies that this is what happened in the case of Moses and the Judaism that followed.

This logic is flawed on a number of levels – not least of which is that, as with most secular arguments, it assumes that religion has no value whatsoever and could only ever be facilitated by mass delusion. As we shall see in the following chapter, the reality is that religion has numerous benefits that are entirely positive and self-evident. If nothing else, the irony is that Freud himself had an uneasy relationship with his Jewish father – which might very well have informed his irrational assaults on God and religion! His arguments focused exclusively on patriarchy, which said more about him than the religions in question. He was beset by the exact same ‘neuroses’ he attributed to others.

Other anthropological studies have traced our belief in God back to certain parts of the brain. Julian Jaynes acknowledges that we have an “inner dialogue” that takes place between the two different sides of the brain. She posits that the “bicameral minds” of our ancestors were unable to make sense of this dialogue and falsely attributed it to an external God. But again, this is a genetic fallacy because their doing so has no bearing on God’s existence. It’s possible for us to have an “inner dialogue” AND it’s possible for a divine intelligence to enter into that dialogue. Just because mankind is prone to madness or schizophrenia, it doesn’t follow that his every thought is an erroneous product of such a condition! It’s perfectly possible for God to exist DESPITE our

inadequacies. In this sense, scientific study needn't displace God. On the contrary, it prunes back the false assumptions about God and leaves us staring at the real thing.

In our modern day media culture, we often see 'magicians' smugly implying that they've exposed the folly of the paranormal by merely replicating it. A prominent example is Derren Brown, who specializes in revealing how superstitions are baseless and can be explained away in rational terms. As with the scientific studies, this is all well and good but it has no bearing on ultimate reality. It's possible to stage a false miracle AND it's possible for a genuine one to supersede it. Indeed, the biblical story of Moses illustrates this very point. Everything he claims to be able to do is apparently replicated by the Pharaoh's resident illusionists. But the serpents they miraculously manifest are symbolically 'eaten' by those of Moses! Likewise, the positive effects of religion supersede the feeble attempts to disprove it. The 'serpents' of cynicism merely give sustenance to true religion once they have been conquered.

The credence we give to our imagination needn't be a negative thing. As Albert Einstein famously insisted, "Imagination is more important than knowledge." It doesn't always serve us to view the world in such cold, analytical terms. If you dismiss a work of art as a "smattering of paint", you haven't done yourself any favours – you've merely failed to see the bigger picture! Likewise, an excessively critical appraisal of religion misses the point. Self-proclaimed 'intellectuals' often fancy themselves as having the capacity to understand all things, but their smug self-regard is invariably a handicap that needs to be overcome. This is the attitude that St Paul

was critical of at *Romans 1:20* when he said, “Professing themselves to be wise they became fools.”

The Buddha preferred to think of them as people who had been ‘shot’ but refused treatment until they had discovered who shot them and why. They would die before their inane questions had been answered! Likewise, the intellectual ‘dies’ a spiritual death when he is shot by the arrow of cynicism and refuses to acknowledge the wound – preferring instead to inflate his ego with pretentious posturing. In a similar vein, Wordsworth accused the “meddling intellect” of “murdering to dissect”. A keen intelligence is a sharp instrument that could just as easily ‘kill’ the thing it seeks to understand. The Indian guru, Sri Yukteswar, compared it to “a double-edged sword that could either lance the boil of ignorance or decapitate oneself.”

Speaking of death, the Russian priest Alexander Elchaninov likened uncompromising intellectualism to a ‘corpse’ that had lost its vibrancy. The corpse had the “definite outlines” beloved of empiricists, but the damn thing simply wasn’t ALIVE! Religion values “living truth” rather than its static, material equivalent. In the lesser known *Essene Gospel Of Peace*, Jesus can be found criticizing people who fawn over “the dead words of dead men.” As much as he respected scripture, he knew its fallible contents were secondary to intuitive wisdom. This was also true of Socrates, who valued lively conversation over the written word. He maintained that those who read incessantly “knew nothing at all” unless they EMBODIED the principles at hand.

I’m often tempted to agree with what Rene Descartes said when he dismissed philosophy as “a way of talking nonsense whilst sounding intelligent.” The mystic poet Richard Rolle also hit the nail on the head

when he criticized philosophers for their “interminable questioning, motivated solely by vanity.” As King Solomon lamented of the worldly life, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Sometimes people are more interested in SOUNDING good than DOING good! And, as Socrates would argue, the irony is that a man ceases to be ‘wise’ the minute he demonstrates such egotism.

It’s not always a sign of ‘intelligence’ to talk in unintelligible riddles. I’ve always maintained that if you can’t express yourself simply then you probably don’t know what you’re talking about! As William of Ockham famously implied, the simplest answer is invariably the best one. It takes more skill to embody something complex and then reinterpret it in simple terms, which is what Jesus did so well in his parables. That was my intention with this book – to use accessible layman’s terms as much as possible without entirely weakening my argument. I do hope I have succeeded on some level.

In debates such as these, I often fear that I will be “blown out of the water” by highly qualified scientists and philosophers. But then I realize that they’ve lost the argument the minute they resort to smug semantics. Only an insecure opponent who lacks eloquence would take such a route. True wisdom has always flowed effortlessly. As Plato implied, there is an ‘eternal’ wisdom that is always waiting to arise in any given scenario. For instance, if an opponent begins spouting scientific jargon, it suffices to illustrate that their faith in science as a whole is misguided. If a man’s basic orientation is off, however far he races in the wrong direction is of no merit! There are certain timeless truths that can change the course of any argument. The little pebbles of pedantry are no match for such boulders.

Jewish philosophy has always maintained that human reason is secondary to divine intuition. They posit that a primitive man who responds to his instincts can develop into a man who responds to his 'emotions'. This man can then in turn develop into one whose 'emotions' are subservient to his 'intellect'. But the ultimate goal is to develop further still into a mind that embodies the 'divine' and operates at the highest level. We also see this in Hinduism, which speaks of similar 'sheaths' being peeled back one by one to increasingly better one's prospects. In this view, the atheist is guilty of stalling at the level of the intellect. A great place to be, yes – but not the BEST place to be. As with science itself, however beneficial it is there is always something more.

When a man swears by his intellect alone, his achievements are limited to the vain machinations of his brain. But marvellous things can happen if he surrenders his mind to a higher power and makes himself a blank canvas onto which a masterpiece might be painted. This is what *Star Wars* embodied so well with the mantra, "Use the force, Luke!" It's what the poet John Keats rendered more articulately as "negative capability". He felt that reason in the descendant put intuition in the ascendant and became an unlikely 'capability'. This is not the abdication of reason, as some might protest. Rather, it is reason operating at the highest level – "speeded up and encapsulated in an instant" as Karen Armstrong puts it. It's the intellect PLUS divine insight – not the intellect lacking something.

St Anselm certainly gave a lot of credence to the imagination and made it the crux of his argument in favour of God's existence. His much misunderstood "ontological argument" posited that God exists if

for no other reason than we can ‘imagine’ such a thing. Even atheists must concede that they do this. They conceive of a God and then conclude that the imagined deity does not exist in any meaningful way. Specifically, St Anselm argued that God is superior to our fondest imaginings on account of the fact they lack the quality of ‘existence’. In his view, God was the perfect reality that existed beyond our wildest dreams.

It’s a clumsy argument, but I think the point he was trying to make was that anything we can conceive of exists on some level. Even if we imagine pigs flying, we are correct in the sense that pigs exist, wings exist, and flying exists. We are merely in error for combining the imagined things in an unworkable way! It goes back to the eternal truth that everything always has and always will exist – just not in a form we recognize. In any case, God is no conglomerate of things so much as ONE thing. Our notion of her existence therefore carries more credence. Quite frankly, we wouldn’t be having this conversation if God didn’t exist. It simply wouldn’t occur to us – not least because we wouldn’t be here to do the thinking! As Isaac Newton put it, “We think God’s thoughts after him.”

Naturally, staunch atheists like Richard Dawkins find this logic risible – protesting that it gives us free license to assert the existence of ANYTHING. As we saw in the first chapter, this is not entirely fair because we have REASON to believe that God exists – much more so than any arbitrary object. It is odd to assert the existence of a ‘teapot’ that lurks behind the sun because such a thing would serve no purpose, and there is no evidence of such a thing in our everyday experience. Nor has any great man walked the earth and attributed his achievements

to such an entity. A creative intelligence, on the other hand, is on the table and is perfectly possible to contemplate – even if the idea doesn't appeal to us. It's not fair to say that an individual is 'deluded' to believe in such a thing. It's more accurate to say that you simply disagree about the extent to which this is so. But of course that would require rational thought – and as we shall see in the next chapter, that's not the atheist's strong suit...

9. THE ENEMIES OF REASON

“Belief is the assent of the mind to an intelligible proposition.”

- Thomas Jefferson

Around the same time his book was doing the rounds, Richard Dawkins also fronted several television documentaries – one of which was titled *The Enemies Of Reason*. As with my naïve expectations about *The God Delusion*, I rather hoped the “enemies of reason” in question would be the marauding hordes of atheists who oppose reason at every opportunity – armed with unsubstantiated opinions and wild assumptions about things they know very little about. Suffice to say, I was disappointed once more! It turns out the “enemies of reason” in question were spiritual people of various persuasions.

I am actually being flippant this time. I appreciate that some religious individuals do indeed stretch credulity to breaking point and can be wildly irrational in their more superstitious moments. However, one point I would like to make is that religious belief is nowhere near as ‘irrational’ as cynics presume – and nor is atheism as ‘rational’ as they would like to think. On the contrary, I would argue that militant atheism is the most irrational belief system to ever enjoy such credibility.

The intellectual sins of the atheist are too numerous to recount here. This book is barely halfway through and we’ve already encountered some frighteningly bizarre reasoning! We’ve seen how they give undue credence to the physical world and their fallible perception OF the physical world. We’ve looked on aghast as they wilfully misunderstand

sophisticated scriptures and commit the cardinal sin of “judging a book by its cover”. We’ve also seen how they deal in generalizations and seem utterly incapable of distinguishing sincere religion from its dark shadow. None of these are ‘rational’ responses to religion. In fact, you’d be locked up if you applied such logic to any other walk of life!

I’ve always maintained that I’ve never met an intelligent atheist. What I mean by that is one who actually understands the religions he is so scornful of (or even the science he is so sure about). There’s always something missing. They didn’t know this, they haven’t read that, they heard this, they assumed that. Richard Dawkins himself openly admits that there are religious principles he doesn’t ‘understand’ (although the implication is that nobody does). This is the very “absence of understanding” that we associated with delusion in the previous chapter. It’s the dictionary definition of ‘ignorance’, and it’s hard to take such opposition seriously.

They would no doubt say the same of an impenetrable religious fanatic who knows nothing of science and philosophy. But two wrongs don’t make a right. As Sir Francis Bacon asserted, those that aspire to be truly ‘knowledgeable’ must become proficient in BOTH fields. He saw religion and science as two ‘books’ that any man would benefit from being acquainted with. Indeed, Charles Darwin diplomatically prefaced his *Origin Of Species* with that very sentiment. We also see this philosophy in the Islamic *Rasa’il*, which states that “The seeker after truth must shun no sciences, scorn no book, nor cling to any one creed.”

I firmly believe that the average religious believer makes more of an effort in this endeavour than their cynical counterparts (even if

they're not entirely successful). Their respect for a 'creator' gives them a respect for 'creation' itself, which invariably manifests itself in an exploration of history and the natural world. While this is obviously true of atheists too, I observe that it is only the more intellectual ones – whereas the spark of appreciation is aflame in ANY sincere religious believer. I would assert with some confidence that the average religious believer knows more about science than the average atheist knows about religion. Indeed, a truly spiritual person scarcely has any problem with science at all and delights at its discoveries. The militant atheist, on the other hand, has a scathing disrespect for religion that clouds their judgment. They cannot assimilate the information contained within scripture any more than they can bear to read the rap sheet of a convicted criminal!

The inevitable result is that their opinions are often vacuous and frighteningly ill-informed. Above all else, it defies the 'reason' beloved of such people. I remember reading various reviews of *The God Delusion* in 2006 around the time it came out. Scientific journals and liberal newspapers were praising it with perfect 5-star reviews, gleefully insinuating that every sentence was infallibly true. This, of course, was highly unlikely. Even Richard Dawkins himself would blush at such praise! The reality was that it was a very flawed appraisal of the situation that just so happened to capture the public's imagination. A sensible person could have taken issue with every single chapter (as indeed you would with any book), but balance was nowhere to be seen here. It the irony to end all ironies, it was hailed as infallible scripture and became a religious artefact that symbolized the demise of God.

The single most offensive development in this war of words is that it has been billed as “faith versus reason”. Nothing could be more inappropriate. For a start, religion is neither entirely a matter of ‘faith’ nor entirely devoid of ‘reason’. Likewise, atheism is neither entirely ‘reasonable’ nor is it without leaps of ‘faith’. The terms ‘faith’ and ‘reason’ are only appropriate in the sense that religion appears to take SOME things on faith whereas atheism appears to take NONE.

Notice the word ‘appears’, because even this small concession isn’t warranted. Cynics like to think their world view is free of unsubstantiated beliefs, but the reality is that they inadvertently take many things on faith – just so long as they don’t pertain to God. As GK Chesterton cautioned, “When people stop believing in God, they don’t believe in ‘nothing’ – they believe in ANYTHING.” The atheist is happy to believe in anything EXCEPT God! A good example is Richard Dawkins’ baseless belief in “multiple universes”, which is his response to the “anthropic principle” that dictates that this universe is finely tuned to sustain life as we know it. Although it’s perfectly possible that there are as many universes as there are planets in ours, there are no grounds for believing that such a thing is entirely true. Certainly no more so than God herself, who could still preside over however many universes we vainly imagine there might be.

Speaking of figureheads like Richard Dawkins, his less intelligent followers are also guilty of taking what HE says “on faith”! It’s a classic case of “the blind leading the blind”. They don’t understand sophisticated scientific principles any more than the average person, and certainly don’t have the means to investigate such things for themselves. They simply behold a scientist’s opinion to be more valid

than their own (and indeed that of anyone else). The irony is that this is a similar relationship to that which a religious believer might have with a spiritual authority. The atheist has simply withdrawn his faith from one party and placed it in the hands of another. The act of 'faith' itself remains the same. Indeed, it could be argued that they are in error for withdrawing their faith from the divine and placing it in the hands of a fallible mortal. A religious person 'may' be in error for appropriating divine status to a religion. The atheist most certainly IS in error for endowing another human being with such power! It's idolatry of the most grotesque and counter-productive kind.

Nonetheless, faith remains synonymous with religion. The main problem with this is that the word 'faith' seldom does justice to what we're talking about here. It does, after all, have various connotations. Critics take it to mean a blind belief that God exists and religion has value when these things may not be true. This is taking things "on faith" and doesn't do justice to the definition of 'faith' itself in the spiritual sense. More often than not, 'faith' is a MEASURE of spiritual prowess – not a belief that it exists. This is why Jesus uttered those immortal words, "Ye of little faith." If we were dealing with beliefs, he would have said "Ye of NO faith." You can't 'believe' in things to various degrees. You either do or you don't. Faith, then, is a sliding scale of spiritual prowess. It's rather like when we're asked to "have faith in ourselves". Our existence isn't in doubt at that juncture! We're merely being asked to contemplate our existence and draw out its full potential. Likewise, God's existence isn't in doubt for the spiritual individual. 'Faith' merely measures one's response to the fact that God exists.

Lapsed religious believers often talk about “losing their faith”, but it’s more accurate to say that they never had it in the first place. Like a seed drifting on the surface of a flower bed, a faith so easily displaced was never deeply planted to begin with. If you can countenance God’s non-existence, it obviously means you never made contact with her before. Ironically, then, it transpires that ‘faith’ in the crude sense is actually quite an anti-religious proposition!

It’s no coincidence that masses of people were once devoutly religious and have suddenly become staunchly secular. It’s not about their convictions so much as their LACK of conviction. They’re what political campaigners would describe as a “floating voter”. Such people are liable to sway wildly from one side to the other decade after decade. It is for this reason that Richard Dawkins is scornful of fence-sitting ‘agnostics’ and would prefer them to come out as committed atheists. But religious communities don’t benefit from their fickle support either, so they should indeed concede that they have no concept of God.

Similar misunderstandings also surround the word ‘belief’. Earlier, I conceded that belief “wasn’t a big enough word” to describe my impulse towards the divine. Karen Armstrong would go so far as to say that it isn’t even the RIGHT word! Not even the right concept. In her book, *The Case For God*, she illustrates that the word we translate as ‘belief’ never actually meant ‘belief’ in the uncertain sense. She prefers to think of it as a ‘commitment’ to something and a desire to ‘engage’ with it. Like ‘faith’, the word rendered as ‘belief’ measures one’s ‘commitment’ to a cause – not a vain belief that the cause exists or has value.

In New Age circles, the famed “Ten Commandments” of Moses are often reinterpreted as the “Ten Commitments” – commitments that a spiritual individual naturally makes, rather than ‘commandments’ that they blindly follow. As we’ve already established, no God worth worshipping would be so insecure as to ‘need’ anything – so any ‘commandments’ are best rendered as ‘commitments’ that a spiritual person naturally gravitates towards. Far from being counter-intuitive acts of faith, their benefits are self-evident and accord with reason.

This brings me to the next point I would like to make. Not only is religion NOT a matter of blind ‘faith’, but it’s actually a champion of the ‘reason’ beloved of atheists. In fact, it could be argued that the world’s various scriptures are nothing BUT reasoning – moral reasoning. The *Qur’an*, in particular, is one long argument for monotheism and against cynicism, for virtue and against vice. It’s a hypothetical debate between God’s messengers and their opponents, featuring carefully reasoned arguments from each side. Every possible argument against God’s existence and the value of religion is given airtime. As Martin Luther King would say of pacifism, this was no “shying away” so much as a “courageous confrontation”.

The Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* is also one long conversation between the godly Krishna and his mortal protégé, Arjuna. The fallible human doesn’t blindly accept what he is told from on high. A rational discourse is entered into and the benefits of a spiritual life are made abundantly clear. Pious individuals are often accused of believing this or that “because it’s in the *Bible*”. It’s more accurate to say that they’re convinced by the arguments put forth in such documents. As Thomas Jefferson defined it, “Belief is the assent of the mind to an intelligible

proposition.” Even secular thinkers like Karl Marx cautioned that it was wrong to dismiss religion as “intellectually empty”. He acknowledged that it had value and simply sought to transfer those values to a political context.

Reason is especially evident in the way Jesus articulates his ideas in the *New Testament*. He didn’t mutter “Love your enemies” and then leave people to guess what that meant! He went on to explain that it’s a mark of good character because “even a tax collector” returns love for love and hate for hate. Anybody can act based on that kind of self-interest, but to be truly special – truly divine – you have to meet hate with its opposite, love. He also illustrated that it was a means of preventing unnecessary conflict, which is obviously true because you can’t fight fire with fire. Specifically, Albert Einstein proved that you “can’t destroy something with the same energy that created it.” This is just one of many examples where the words of religious thinkers accord with reason – scientific reasoning at that.

Even the story of Adam & Eve can be reinterpreted as an endorsement of reason. Instead of being two individuals, it is often thought that they represent two sides of the human mind – the female quality of ‘passion’ and the male quality of ‘reason’. Neither one without the other is of any benefit. Reason is like the rudder on a boat, whereas passion is the wind that fills it sails. Passion without reason staggers around aimlessly, whereas reason without passion never even moves! Embodied as Adam and Eve, ‘passion’ is enflamed by the negative influence of the ‘serpent’ and proceeds to lead ‘reason’ astray. This confused mind is then ejected from the ‘paradise’ of contentment and must stagger around looking for happiness outside of itself – never

quite finding it again. The allegory is all about ‘reason’ being thwarted – it’s just that the ‘reasoning’ in question is that God was a better source of happiness than the illusory material world. It’s simultaneously an argument AGAINST materialism and FOR reason.

Contrary to what atheists claim, ‘reason’ is not the exclusive property of scepticism. It’s merely a vehicle that we use to arrive at a chosen destination – not a lofty perch from which we see the truth. It’s just as easy to ‘reason’ that there IS a God as it is to ‘reason’ that there isn’t. We simply encounter data and process it to support one view or the other. Friedrich Nietzsche famously argued that moral reasoning is futile in this respect, because we’re more interested in “justifying our vain desires” than pursuing the ‘truth’.

Similarly, reason is neither inherently ‘good’ nor inherently ‘bad’ – so there may not be any merit in attributing it to one side or the other anyway. We might ‘reason’ that a positive course of action is correct, or we could just as easily ‘reason’ that it isn’t worthwhile and a little negativity will do no harm. Those with vices, such as drug addicts and alcoholics, do this on a daily basis. They convince themselves that it’s the best way they could possibly spend their time and money. They may be in error when they do so (and invariably are). The atheist risks staggering down the very same path of self-destruction if he gives undue credence to his fallible reasoning. As with Adam & Eve, his misguided faculties may lead him OUT of ‘paradise’ – not closer to it!

The French novelist, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, makes this point in his work. He felt that ‘reason’ was open to persuasion and worried about it being enslaved by egotism when a man is devoid of a spiritual dimension. He insisted it was essential that a child develops spiritual

qualities before he is lost forever to rigid rationality. This is perhaps another argument in favour of children being exposed to religion. The only alternative is a horde of self-obsessed materialists, which is what we're churning out in most secular societies.

Reason may have no bearing on the ultimate reality of God's existence, but it does help us clear away the obstacles to such a conclusion. It helps us to arrive at what Catholics describe as a "mature faith" – one that has been challenged and emerges all the better for it. This process invariably prunes away dogmatic misunderstandings and unnecessary distractions. Chief among these are 'superstitions', which are often associated with religion. You don't have to look far to find a congregation fastidiously following rituals in a bid to appease God or invoke his power. Although many faiths find themselves veering down this path, the irony is that most religions were founded on arguments AGAINST superstition!

In the *Old Testament*, Abraham rebelled against his pagan father's 'superstitious' worship of inanimate objects – preferring instead to develop a relationship with "the one true God". Muhammad went through this transformation himself in 7th century Arabia, when he purged Mecca of pagan practices and implored people to look to the moral reasoning of the *Qur'an*. And most famously of all, Jesus quarrelled with out-of-touch Jewish clergymen on a daily basis – exposing the folly of observing rules and rituals for no good reason. The great men of history knew that true power lies WITHIN a man and not outside of him. Although rituals can help to remind us of this fact, they are of limited use when they fail to do so. It's what Muslims value as the "inner reality" as opposed to the "outer law". For them, anyone

who succumbs to “idle speculation” is guilty of the intellectual sin of ‘zannah’.

More contemporary religious thinkers like Immanuel Kant and Isaac Newton were also keen to steer religion away from supernatural superstition. As a scientist, Newton in particular was scornful of the supernatural elements and accused people of “liking best what they understand least.” He preferred to reinterpret biblical events in favour of reason. He went so far as to champion the faith of Noah as “a rational contemplation of nature” – one that didn’t rely on scriptures or miracles. For him, Noah was a man who was in tune with nature and merely benefited from that relationship when a natural disaster visited Mesopotamia. The ‘God’ speaking to him was Nature itself, and his ‘faith’ was in his own ability to make sense of the situation. In this view, faith IS reason!

Of course, it could be argued that religions have simply removed lots of little superstitions and replaced them with one big one. This is a little unfair because, although the details are in question, the overarching hypothesis of a creative intelligence is perfectly sound. In fact, I would argue that it defies reason to claim that God does NOT exist on some level. Quite frankly, the idea that life as we know it came out of nowhere for no reason is preposterous. It’s certainly more far-fetched than anything claimed in the *Bible*! Sometimes people are so eager to distance themselves from something that they end up backing into an even darker corridor.

One question will always haunt atheists – why is there ‘something’ rather than ‘nothing’? Why are we even having this conversation? Why have we evolved into such a grand species, uniquely capable of

contemplating these very questions? Given that great men have walked the earth and invited us to believe that there's more to life than meets the eye, is it really so difficult to believe? Is it really likely that the billions of people that do believe as much are 'deluded'? Or is it more likely that they sense a value in religion that others have overlooked? As Neale Donald Walsch muses, "There's something we don't understand – the understanding of which will change everything."

All beliefs are based on evidence of a kind. As Oz Guinness insists, "Faith does not feed on thin air but on facts." Religious people didn't wake up one morning and decide to subscribe to set of principles for no reason! It makes sense to them on some level and accords with their life experiences. The crux of the *Qur'an's* argument in favour of God's existence is the providence of nature. As it repeatedly assures us, "There are signs for those who pay attention." Even if we accept that life 'evolved' naturally, it seems clear that it serves some sort of majestic purpose. The idea that it was some sort of cosmic accident may be 'possible', but it remains counter-intuitive. If the Big Bang was out by so much as one in a billion then the planets wouldn't have fallen into place the way they have, and ours wouldn't have been capable of cultivating life as we know it. It's what is known as the "Goldilocks Effect". A notch too close to the sun and it would have been too hot, a notch too far away and it would have been too cold.

The idea that the Big Bang just so happened to be mathematically perfect of its own accord defies common sense. You could win the lottery every day for the rest of your life against such odds! Even if we concede there are as many universes as there are planets (and that at least one of them therefore stood a chance of stumbling across

perfection), we must ask how THAT peculiar of affairs came into being. It's actually quite 'unscientific' to suggest that order came out of chaos. And yet the atheist must continue to place their faith in blind 'chaos', because anything remotely 'orderly' betrays an intelligent will.

There are of course arguments against the evidence for God's existence. Indeed, there are arguments against 'evidence' of any kind because that's the whole point! They're pieces of a puzzle rather than the completed puzzle that constitutes 'proof'. I'm not disputing that it's 'possible' that life can be explained away without invoking God. The point I'm trying to make is that it's not at all 'likely'. It shouldn't be our first port of call, and it certainly shouldn't be embraced with such gusto that the spiritual individual is vilified and ridiculed. To do so would defy the very 'reason' that atheists claim to be so keen to uphold. As "Pascal's Wager" has it, there's very little to gain by railing against religion and everything to lose. As we shall see in the next chapter, the only reason anybody would make a point of not believing in God is to score points off those who do...

10. THE EGO HAS LANDED

“In the absence of God, egotism would not only be permissible but would be recognized as a virtue in the human condition.”

- *Dostoevsky*

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins proudly compares atheists to ‘cats’ who are too ‘independent’ to be marshalled together as an effective group. He meant it in a positive way, but it inadvertently reveals the dark side of atheism as well. If atheists have anything in common with ‘cats’, it is their stubborn arrogance and smug self-regard! I love cats, I hasten to add, but there can be no doubt that they are proud creatures. ‘Pride’ in the vulgar sense is not the quality it purports to be and often “comes before a fall”, as the proverb would have it. We might also consider the warning that “curiosity killed the cat”. When atheists stubbornly march down their own avenues of inquiry, they invariably do so to their detriment.

As the title of this book suggests, I consider atheism to be the “irrational fear of religion” – one fuelled by a potent cocktail of ignorance and arrogance. I observe it to be an overreaction to the fact that religion itself has its dark sides. I use the word ‘fear’ to describe this overreaction because ‘fear’ can be traced back to a desire unfulfilled or an ego compromised. This is especially appropriate for atheists, who seem to be motivated entirely by vanity. Indeed, there is no logical reason to make a point of not believing in God unless you intend to antagonize those who do. As the 16th *Surah* of the *Qur’an* intones, “If people do not believe in Allah and the hereafter, it is because their hearts refuse to know and they are arrogant.”

To entertain doubts is natural, but to maliciously fire them at others is an act of wounded pride. As Neale Donald Walsch muses, “All attack is a cry for help.” The exasperated atheist would no doubt claim that the same is true of their intolerant religious opponents, and they’d be justified in those cases. As surely as a smug atheist proclaims himself to be ‘intelligent’ whereas others are less so, the pious individual vainly imagines himself to “closer to God” than others. Both stances are insecure acts of egotism, but two wrongs don’t make a right. The folly of each party must be exposed and addressed.

In the interests of a diplomatic compromise, it’s often implied that religious fanatics and militant atheists are “as bad as each other”. The conviction that God exists seems to be scarcely different to the conviction that she doesn’t. Neither stance can be proved objectively, and so they’re both deemed to be as likely (or unlikely) as each other. I reject this assumption on a couple of levels. For a start, as we’ve already established, the sincere religious believer knows for a fact that God exists and simply struggles to convey as much to those who are unreceptive. There’s no conceivable scenario in which the atheist “knows for a fact” that God does not exist.

More pertinently, I feel the two convictions are also different in character. It’s more arrogant to assert that something DOESN’T exist than it is to vainly imagine that it DOES. When a man entertains a belief in God, there are millions of shapes that belief can take. It’s an open-ended hypothesis as well as an open-minded one! The conviction that something does NOT exist is rather more precise and authoritative. The grounds for taking such a stance need to be much sounder than those of our current atheists. Until then, the view is motivated largely

by self-righteous indignation. As Alexander Elchaninov intoned, “A resistance to God always has a base motive.”

Karl Marx once described atheism as a ‘protest’ against religion. I agree with that appraisal entirely – although I see it as an inarticulate protest whereas he saw it as a valid one. The average atheist is simply annoyed by individuals and institutions that they perceive to be religious. Notice the word ‘perceive’ because, as we shall see in a later chapter, they’re often in error when they make this assumption. Unfortunately, they then know no better way of expressing that dismay than to reject everything and tar everybody with the same brush. Like an animal whose free will has been compromised, the ego lashes out in a most indiscriminate manner.

We also see this in the way religious people overreact to secular views. John Durant makes the point that ‘Creationists’ don’t disbelieve in evolution so much as they disagree with the arrogance with which it is thrust upon them. Their feigned belief in ‘Creationism’ is commensurate with their desire to oppose their secular opponents. Science simply becomes a battleground where secularism is confronted and confounded – even if underhand tactics must be used. We also see this in the way extremely liberal politics force people to the right and vice versa. Raised voices and wagging fingers create a siege mentality where the ‘truth’ gives way to the egotistical desire to win a war of words. It is for this reason that the *Qur’an* repeatedly appeals for discussion to take place “in a pleasant manner”. As with the insights of meditation, the truth is easier to hear against a background of calm silence.

Once someone dislikes you, it pains them to agree with you on any level whatsoever. Even if you were to drag them out of a burning car, they would criticize you for yanking on their arm too hard! This is the climate we have cultivated in religious and political debates, so it's no wonder that each side fails to find common ground with the other. Richard Dawkins concedes as much in *The God Delusion* when he laments that scientists have become reluctant to acknowledge weaknesses in their work. Science has traditionally thrived on making mistakes, but the perceived conflict with religion has forced scientists to pretend that the field is infallible. The result is that science has practically become a religion in and of itself! The objective truth has given way to bitter propaganda.

An egotist seeks to distance himself from any given source of frustration, and this seems to be especially true of the secular response to religion. As Karen Armstrong observes, "Atheism is parasitically dependent on the theism it seeks to discredit and becomes its reverse mirror image." In the atheist's haste to forge this divide, the atheist invariably ascribes demonic qualities to religion that it simply does not possess! A good example of this is when we encounter critics who insist that there's nothing remotely positive about religion. Richard Dawkins is not among these, I hasten to add, but his less articulate contemporary Christopher Hitchens most certainly is. He subtitled his atheistic tome, *How Religion Poisons Everything*. EVERYTHING? Really? Every single aspect of the human experience has been 'poisoned' by the virtuous moral reasoning of religion? Surely it's more accurate to say that insincere individuals do strange things in the name of misguided piety, and that you're simply annoyed by those

people? The stronger the light is, the darker the shadow of resistance becomes. The venom with which religion is opposed is a testament to how powerful it is in the first place.

The cynic weakens his own argument when he cannot bring himself to identify any qualities in his opponent. St Augustine offered this very advice to his fellow Christians when THEIR baseless disregard for science was doing more harm than good. All belief systems have their pros and cons, and it goes without saying that religion in particular is an unparalleled force for good at its best. That's arguably the whole point of it. If a cynic is incapable of deducing this much, what else is he wrong about? His assumption that God does not exist on any level whatsoever becomes even more farcical than it was before.

Further to morality, another favoured battleground for the atheist is 'intelligence'. In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins proudly asserts that "most intellectuals don't believe in God". I have no reason to doubt this. But that's not to say that the opinions of these so-called 'intellectuals' are more credible. The connection is that 'intelligence' goes hand in hand with ARROGANCE! Indeed, you have to be somewhat egotistical to describe yourself as an 'intellectual' in the first place. As Socrates would argue, a person inherently ceases to be 'wise' once they demonstrate such bad character.

There's a difference between being 'intellectual' and being 'intelligent' in the praiseworthy sense. The 'intellectual' indulges the mind at the expense of body and soul, whereas a truly 'intelligent' individual employs the mind in concert with his other faculties. He can be said to be "playing with a full deck" as it were. This is seldom true

of the self-confessed ‘intellectual’, who practically prides himself on living a tortured existence! A seemingly ‘intelligent’ man can still lack the ability to make life work and is no happier than his ‘ignorant’ counterparts. Even the inspired prophet Solomon conceded as much in *Ecclesiastes 1:18* where he laments, “In much wisdom is much grief. He that increases knowledge increases sorrow.”

Karl Marx was one such ‘intellectual’ who felt that religion encouraged people to ascribe qualities to God that they possessed themselves. He argued that it limited our potential by giving our power away unnecessarily. But this well-meaning ideology goes too far the other way when it ascribes powers to mankind that ought to belong to a deity! The egotistical atheist casts himself as God and ends up floundering in a role for which he is ill-equipped. This is the subtext of a much misunderstood line from *2nd Thessalonians 2:4*, “He opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God, sitting in the temple as though he were God.” Fundamentalists take this to be a reference to a worldly anti-Christ, but the ‘anti-Christ’ in question is the EGO! The ‘temple’ is the human body under the control of a negative influence as opposed to a positive one. As the Russian priest Alexander Elchaninov mused, “The essence of pride is to shut yourself off from God. The essence of humility is to let God inhabit you.”

Arrogance goes hand in hand with a disbelief in God because it’s essentially a misguided belief in oneself. As we’ve seen in previous chapters, the atheist gives a disproportionate amount of credence to their own fallible appraisal of the outside world. Anything they cannot perceive does not exist, anything they cannot understand cannot be understood, anything they cannot do cannot be done, etc. The

egotistical crimes of the atheist are legion and there is scarcely time to recount them here. Suffice to say, ‘intelligence’ is the start of a vicious cycle. Intelligence leads to arrogance and arrogance leads to atheism. Atheism then inspires one to lay claim to ‘intelligence’ and the cycle of self-destructive self-regard begins all over again!

It seems clear to me that most declarations of atheism are designed to lay claim to a sense of intellectual superiority. Atheism has become so closely intertwined with science (albeit erroneously), that people feel they can no longer be both religious AND intelligent. The ego cannot bear to think of itself as anything less than wise and so religion has to give way. Indeed, one glance at the media reveals that it’s fashionable to lean towards atheism. It’s the first port of call and practically goes without saying – especially in a sceptical UK. Anyone who dares to express a religious view is denounced as some sort of intellectual oddity!

As we’ve seen, the irony is that they probably know more about the issues at hand than their cynical opponents – and they’ve certainly demonstrated more courage by staying true to their convictions in the face of intense opposition. I resent being dismissed as ‘weak-minded’ because I know for a fact that my spiritual transformation has involved a lot of mental strength. When you’re surrounded by cynical individuals, it’s ‘easy’ to fall in line with them. That’s precisely why so many people take that route! It’s much harder to stand up for yourself at a point in time when certain views are unfashionable. It involves dispensing of the ego because you can no longer look to others for approval. This is what most cynics are unable to do. They deeply cherish the ego and subscribe to any view that nourishes it.

As a religious educator, I've seen this firsthand in the classrooms of the UK. In the introduction to this book, I recounted how I observed one class where all the students proudly declared themselves to be atheists except one – and even he was soundly persecuted for going against the grain. I feel this is a telling microcosm of what is happening in the adult world. All of a sudden, it goes without saying that there is no God and religion is without merit. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers, of course, but it's chilling that one particular 'answer' can be embraced so fondly – especially when it's as fallible as any other belief system.

But of course, there was also something else at work when those students proudly denounced religion. In addition to having a clumsy understanding of the religions in question (and an even clumsier understanding of the atheism they subscribed to), there was also the instinct of self-preservation to contend with. Teenagers are deeply cynical at the best of times (I certainly was!) and seldom have the wherewithal to express an independent opinion – especially not one that is perceived to be 'weak' or 'uncool'. Further to that, many people consider atheism to be the 'easy' option. All they have to do is claim that there's no God and they simultaneously retain their reputation AND avoid having to answer any awkward questions. At least that's the theory, but that's not how it works in my class! There are just as many questions to ask of the committed atheist.

Rebellious school children make a good metaphor for atheism, because the logic behind it is seldom more advanced than that of a child. In addition to protesting against something they find 'annoying', atheists can also be found getting a kick out of rejecting something that

was once powerful. Eliminating God is the equivalent of locking the teacher in a broom cupboard! Power is taken from one place and then located closer to the rebellious individual. Indeed, if the ego is not on the defensive you can bet it's out trying to score points. And the bigger the target is, the more points there are to be scored. Religion may not be popular nowadays, but it most certainly was in the past and its traditions are still available for target practice.

It's no coincidence that some of the more staunch atheists encountered religion in their youth. Their opposition to it now is commensurate with their exposure to it then. The bigger the shadow, the bigger the light. Although there may be genuine grievances in some cases, it's invariably the ego that is fuelling this protest against the past. It pleases the fantasist in us to think that something so powerful has been brought to its knees. It's the same logic that lurks behind conspiracy theories. The ego likes to think there is a monster out there so that it can take the credit for slaying it. It's like a secular reinterpretation of the biblical story of David & Goliath! But as ever, the reality is more complicated than any fairytale and such simplistic reasoning doesn't do it justice.

We often see religion as a special case that must endure excessive scrutiny. As we saw in the first chapter, people become obsessed with 'proof' when it comes to God's existence – but they are happy to forfeit it for things that find their favour such as love, art, and science. Ironically, the thirst for 'proof' is commensurate with the desire to DISPROVE! It becomes a fanatical witch-hunt and therefore ceases to be 'rational'. Like a prejudiced court case, it also fails to yield any results that hold weight.

Jesus himself is a good example of this. As we shall see in the next chapter, the atheist's first port of call is to assume that God's prophets are as 'fictitious' as God herself. It's all part of discrediting everything in an indiscriminate scatter-gun approach. The irony is that there's more evidence for Jesus' existence than there is for his ancient Greek equivalent, Socrates. Like Jesus, Socrates never wrote anything down himself and all we have is the 'testimony' of Plato. The interesting thing is that an atheist would never even consider disputing the existence of Socrates! They may not even criticize his ideas, which is even more interesting because much of what he said accords with the teachings of Christ. The only possible explanation for this discrepancy is that there are points to be scored by professing a belief in a lesser known Greek philosopher. Anyone as 'popular' as Jesus must be discredited at all costs. The irony is that religion is the greatest of all 'philosophy' – philosophy so sound that billions of people subscribe to it. The egotist therefore subscribes to something LESS valid in a bid to feel MORE special.

We're also starting to see this trend in the way the lives of saints such as Gandhi and Mother Teresa are reinterpreted. It has suddenly become fashionable to imply that these people weren't as virtuous as we were led to believe at the time. Again, this insight comes to us in the guise of 'intelligence'. Anyone stupid enough to believe that these people ever achieved anything must be 'gullible' and ignorant of the facts. As ever, these attempts to rewrite history are fuelled entirely by egotism. Convincing yourself that you have uncovered the 'truth' is a dishonest way of implying that those who came before you didn't. It also goes without saying that it's an affront to reason, and relies on the

assumption that something that ‘may’ be true most certainly IS true. Only the ego could make this unnecessary leap.

So far, egotism has worked against religion as a smug minority seek to score points off it. But the irony is that a time is approaching when that exact same egotism will work in its favour once more. Already we can see that the pendulum has swung so far the other way that every other person is an unblinking atheist, devoid of a spiritual dimension. Like the rats in London, they say you’re never far away from one! This means that religious people have become a rare and valuable commodity, because it’s remarkable to find one. Amidst a desert of misunderstanding, anyone who genuinely understands religion becomes an oasis of interest.

The comedian Steve Coogan has even noticed this trend his profession. Defending his newfound penchant for ‘sentimental’ family-friendly fare, he rightly observes that every other comedian is ‘cynical’ nowadays so that approach no longer carries any weight. There’s nothing ‘controversial’ about being the same as everybody else. He argues that the most “avant garde” thing a comedian can do right now is be nice and positive! The unlikely success of Michael McIntyre has already proved as much. Egotism is both a crime and its own punishment. Like all tricks of the devil, the satisfaction it brings is temporary and short-lived.

The ego is destined to turn itself inside out as it struggles to make sense of its own self-destructive agenda. We can see this in the way it is driven to distraction when it tries to figure out how it feels about religion – specifically scriptures like the *Bible*. On the one hand, it feels there are points to be scored by denouncing it as a work of ‘fiction’ –

one that they are far too intelligent to take seriously. But on the other hand, there are points to be scored by claiming to be well-read enough to appreciate it as a GREAT work of fiction! You will often find atheists falling over themselves to concede that the *Bible* is a work of breathtaking ‘poetry’ – but only in as much as it reinforces their argument that it has no real value. The irony is that the cynical atheist is barely even familiar with the text on this small level and cannot express an intelligent opinion either way.

A similar trend is when the western world rejects prominent religions like Christianity and Islam in favour of lesser known ones like Buddhism. You will often find that an egotist is more comfortable professing a belief in something like Buddhism, because it allows him to lay claim to being ‘spiritual’ whilst still retaining a controversial edge. He’s effectively saying, “I’m religious – but not in the way that YOU are religious,” and his ego is duly satisfied. The irony is that Buddhism is 99% similar to Christianity and other faiths, so it’s practically impossible to embrace one and reject the other!

It’s often said that Buddhism is an ‘atheistic’ religion that has no concept of God, so it tends to be the refuge of sceptics. However, this reputation is not entirely warranted. It’s true that Buddhism doesn’t make a big deal of God’s existence, but nor does it rule it out in the way atheists would like. If you asked a Buddhist monk about God, he would profess a passionate belief in such a force. He would perhaps associate God with the ‘Dharma’ – the essence of Buddhism rather than a tangible entity. The irony is that by not dwelling on God’s existence, the Buddhist will actually develop a better relationship with her than most. Free of constraints and expectations, God will flow into the

Buddhist's life quite naturally. A sincere Buddhist, that is! Behind closed doors, the self-proclaimed 'Buddhists' in question will no doubt contravene every principle the Buddha ever stood for (assuming they even know what those principles are in the first place).

Whichever way you cut it, religion will become strangely fashionable the more it is persecuted. Christianity, in particular, is on the brink of being reduced to the mystic cult it was to begin with – which might very well be the best thing that ever happened to it. Instead of being populated by millions who are there against their will, it will be attended by thousands who are there by choice. The sincerity harboured therein will represent the faith well. It harks back to that Zen analogy about the perception of a cloud. Religion was once sacrosanct, is now being torn apart, but will ultimately be revealed to have value again.

We're beginning to see here that the atheist is 'egotistical' on two different levels. 'Egotism' is commonly associated with arrogance (which we have seen more than enough of!), but this self-regard also results in a person seeing themselves as 'separate' from everyone (and everything) else. We've already seen how the egotistical atheist is keen to forge a divide between his infinitely wise self and the lowly religious believers he is surrounded by. He seeks to become their exact opposite by, rather irrationally, refuting everything they stand for.

Similarly, the atheist is also keen to distinguish himself from God. This is ultimately why they disbelieve in such a thing. They behold themselves to be over 'here', assume that God is supposed to be over 'there', and then dispute the existence of such a thing when it doesn't conform to their expectations. The ego refuses to believe that it is part

of something bigger and seeks to be an entity in its own right. Its very existence depends on refuting any notions of God. As Ludwig Wittgenstein conceded, “If I thought of God as another being outside myself only infinitely more powerful, I would consider it my duty to defy him.”

Our desire to believe something has a profound effect on whether we do or not. The latest TV show doing the rounds, *Flash Forward*, raises this very issue when everybody in the world gets a glimpse of their future. Those that saw favourable things beheld them to be destined to come true, whereas those that saw negative things convinced themselves it was a mere ‘illusion’ that needn’t affect their lives. Similarly, the atheist’s disbelief is commensurate with him not wanting God to exist. Religious believers are often accused of “wishful thinking”, but it could just as easily be the other way around!

This kind of egotism also causes us to look outside of ourselves for happiness. The eyes of the ego are constantly looking out into the material world and cannot bear to be turned inward, where everything it stands for will be revealed to be an illusion. This is what Jesus sought to convey when he implied that “the kingdom of God is not here or there... rather, it is WITHIN you.” Looking inside instead of outside is the key to finding a divine spark within you that betrays God’s existence.

This struggle between the ego and the soul is also the hidden meaning of Moses’ story. The materialistic empire of Egypt can be likened to the human body, which the ego rules over like a Pharaoh. Indeed, the Hebrew word for Egypt is ‘Mitzrayim’ – which literally translates as “narrow place” and refers to the limitations of the mortal

form. Interpreted this way, Moses is the ‘soul’ that yearns to liberate his ‘people’ (the energy within the body) from sense enslavement and lead them to the “Holy Land” of enlightenment. The famed ‘Exodus’ is really a movement of the SOUL – tracking its journey from identification with the physical to identification with the spiritual. As with Pharaoh, this is not a change that the ego wants to take place and it resists it until it ends up being washed away in a proverbial deluge!

It’s no coincidence that the ego is often associated with satanic forces of evil. Its selfish, irrational agenda only ever leads to spiritual ruin – as the soul lays buried under ever-increasing layers of materialism. This is the subtext of Jesus being ‘tempted’ by the devil in the desert. The ‘devil’ in question is not a real monster so much as Jesus’ own EGO! His ego circles him and tempts him to abuse his spiritual prowess for worldly gain. But Jesus exposes the folly of this logic and resolves to surrender his powers to a faculty higher than that of the ego. The ego is materialistic and self-aggrandising. Its achievements are doomed to be temporary, whereas God-centred spiritual achievements endure forever. It’s no coincidence that Jesus’ life is a prime example of this. His story is one of an ego forsaken – right down to dying on the cross, which in itself is a symbol of sacrificing the physical.

In addition to cultivating virtues and developing a sense of perspective, the religions of the world are also united in their belief that the ego must be conquered. As we shall see in the next chapter, pious individuals don’t always succeed in this – but they are at least obliged to try. The atheist, on the other hand, positively fulminates at the prospect of compromising the ego! A prime example of this is the

practice of ‘prayer’, which is the cornerstone of any religious practice. It is often associated with vainly ‘wishing’ for things like a visit to Santa’s grotto, but the true purpose of prayer is to humble oneself before something greater – even if that something is nature itself rather than a particular God. This is especially true of Islamic prostration, which requires that the congregation bow down as low as possible in a joint act of humility. As with meditation itself, the individual then emerges with a better sense of perspective.

Nothing so moves an atheist to grief like the prospect of bowing down to something! Rather appropriately, the *Qur’an* attributes this stubborn self-regard to Satan himself who “refused to bow down to Adam” like all the other angels. The irony is that we all ‘worship’ something. If we refuse to worship God, we invariably end up worshipping ourselves instead. I once knew a girl who mocked religious people that said ‘grace’ before a meal, which I never quite understood because it’s a harmless moment of reflection. Surely even the most cynical individual can appreciate the science of what has gone into the food on their plate and how fortunate they are to be enjoying it? It’s a simple matter of human decency – not a religious issue! In their haste to distance themselves from religion, people often stray into dark territory. They’re so very proud of their ‘intelligent’ stance and yet there’s often so very little to be proud of.

The atheist effectively sides with ‘Satan’ when he gives undue credence to the ego. A misfiring ego is responsible for all evil, whereas an ego brought under the control of the soul is a force for selfless good. The Islamic mystic, Fariduddin Attar, once sat meditating in shabby clothes when a king rode by and ridiculed him. Like a smug atheist, he

declared his way of life to be better than that of the lowly spiritual master. The victim of this unwarranted persecution calmly pointed out that the king was “enslaved by his ego”, before concluding “I have mastered that which masters you.” Or as Gandhi put it when his dress was similarly ridiculed by King George, “The king was wearing enough clothes for both of us.” Like Jesus walking on water, the spiritual master is ABOVE that which others drown in...

11. SPREADING THE WORD (THINLY)

“Preach the Gospel always. And if necessary, use words.”

- *St Francis Of Assisi*

In the previous chapter, we saw how egotism fuels an atheist’s rejection of religion. The irony is that pious individuals inadvertently do more to perpetuate this state of affairs than alleviate it! Nothing invokes the wrath of an atheist like the penchant for ‘preaching’ in some Christian denominations. It enflames the ego on a number of levels. Firstly, the disbeliever is made to feel ‘special’ by virtue of their disbelief. Like the prettiest girl at the dance, they then toy with the affections of the preacher and get a kick out of rejecting his advances. The dynamic becomes that of a prized atheist looking down on a needy preacher, and the ego resolves to keep things that way. The sale invariably fails to go through.

Speaking of salesmanship, the second flaw in this approach is that the ‘heathen’ is annoyed beyond belief (quite literally) by anybody who would pursue them in this manner. The ego then resolves to forge a divide between itself and the source of frustration standing before it, and the door invariably slams shut! This is especially true of denominations like Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons, who insist on going door to door with their views. Contrary to popular belief, these are eccentric cults and are not representative of Christianity proper. Nonetheless, the perception is that all religious people are insufferable “Bible bashers” who desperately want you to believe what they believe.

The irony is that religion was never meant to be this obsequious. At its best, religion churns out human beings who are operating at the highest level. It's odd to imagine such people going door to door trying to 'convince' people to respect them! It's supposed to be the other way around. A spiritual master should be such a force of nature that people clamour for the opportunity to follow in THEIR footsteps. This was the case with visionaries like Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, and Muhammad. Jesus, in particular, attracted so many devoted disciples that he famously had to create a shortlist of 12 to do his bidding. Those that were selected felt as honoured as a footballer being called up to play for the national team! Jesus didn't have to stand at their door and 'beg' them to follow him. It was THEY who were stood at the door of HIS kingdom. As the man himself famously intoned, "Knock and the door shall be opened to you."

But of course, preachers would also appeal to scripture to support their case. Jesus' famous "Great Commission" at *Matthew 28:19* sees his disciples being told to "preach to all nations whatsoever I have taught you." What we have to bear in mind is that Jesus' original disciples were uniquely qualified to do that job! "The force was strong with them," as *Star Wars* would put it. The 'force' isn't quite so strong with people who peruse religious books a couple of thousand years later and assume it qualifies them to lecture others. As St Paul himself warns at *Romans 15:14*, aspiring teachers should be "complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another." When a man gets to preaching, he's essentially claiming to be as advanced as Jesus' closest disciples were – and even the most devout Christian has a long way to go before that starts to ring true. We often end up with a case of the

blind leading the blind, which is why organized religion is falling increasingly out of favour with the public as time goes on. It has become more theoretical and less practical, which is why atheists now feel so confident about stepping into the intellectual gap. As Alexander Elchaninov lamented, “They stubbornly refuse to see that Christianity is a LIFE.”

Nowhere is this inadequacy more prevalent than in the bizarre interpretation of scripture that some Christians intend to preach. We’ve already established in great detail how ‘Creationist’ beliefs defy everything Christ stood for. Indeed, a literal understanding of any scripture almost always lacks insight and doesn’t do it justice. Ironically, this is even true of the ‘word’ that preachers seek to ‘spread’! As we’ve established in previous chapters, “The Word” can refer to a spiritual phenomenon as much as a literal ‘word’ that is written or spoken. By assuming it refers to the latter, preachers invariably jeopardize the former – which is arguably the more significant of the two. When Jesus said “spread The Word”, he might very well have meant “spread the spiritual experience that I’ve helped you to cultivate.” Preachers spectacularly fail to facilitate this “spiritual experience” when they thrust a book in someone’s face and force them to take it at face value.

In addition to lacking spiritual insight, fundamentalists further exacerbate the situation by vilifying those who genuinely do have it. Much of what I’ve said on these very pages would anger a pious individual – even though I’m entirely on their side! Christians, in particular, are quick to denounce the followers of any other faith as ‘heathens’ of no merit. Not least the primitive tribes who have no

recognizable religion at all. I often marvel when missionaries purport to ‘enlighten’ such people, because the irony is that they probably have a better relationship with nature (and therefore God) than any westerner ever will! *Surah 18:90-91* of the *Qur’an* implies as much when a great emperor (thought to be Alexander The Great) stumbles across a primitive people and resolves to “leave them as they are” instead of sucking them into a regime that wouldn’t serve them.

Even when it comes to more mainstream faiths, it’s plain to see that Jesus himself was influenced by Indian ideas in addition to his own Judaism. Hinduism and Buddhism may be closer to the hearts of Christians than they like to think. Every other sentence that came out of Christ’s mouth can be traced back to the Hindu *Upanishads* or Buddhist *Sutras*, which were written centuries before he was born. Admittedly, it could be argued that “knowledge is eternal” (as Plato insisted) – and there can be no doubt that Jesus embodied this wisdom better than any other. But the fact remains that there’s much to gain by exposing oneself to other cultures. Far from ‘shaking’ your faith, they help strengthen it like the pillars of a temple – standing in separate locations yet supporting the same structure. Only insecurity and the egotistical desire to be ‘right’ make people reluctant to enter this particular place of worship. A strong mind exposes itself to all things like a sieve – safe in the knowledge that all that is insignificant will wash away, whilst all that is substantial remains.

Of course, the truth can always been found in the way people conduct themselves. As Jesus himself assured us, “By their deeds shall you know them.” Pious actions have always been worth infinitely more than pious words – not least because they’re harder to misinterpret! In

documenting the lives of the Franciscan monks, Thomas of Celano puts particular emphasis on their selfless conduct: “By always doing work that was holy and virtuous, decent and useful, they inspired everyone they came into contact with to emulate their humility and patience.” Whenever I see somebody preaching in the street, I’m tempted to pull them aside and point out that the best thing they could possibly do is achieve something great with their spiritual prowess. Then people will gravitate towards them of their own accord and will be receptive to every word that falls from their lips. As Saint Francis himself once remarked, “Preach the Gospel always. And if necessary, use words.” Empty rhetoric is the last resort of a man whose existence has not been spiritualized. As Gandhi famously put it, “My life is my message.”

When a man lays claim to a spiritual stature that he simply does not possess, it could be said that he’s guilty of the very same ‘egotism’ we accused atheists of in the previous chapter. As surely as the atheist’s ego considers itself to be more ‘intelligent’ than others, the pious individual’s ego delights at the prospect of being “closer to God” than others. They behold themselves to be ‘saved’ whereas others are ‘damned’. You don’t have to be a psychologist to ascertain that this divide is designed to make oneself feel better at the expense of another. As Will Durant observed, “Criticizing others is a dishonest way of praising ourselves.”

Of course, to be judgmental to this extent is bad character and contravenes scripture on a number of levels. Most famously, *Matthew 7:1* implores, “Judge not lest ye be judged.” At *John 12:47*, Jesus later confirms, “If anyone disbelieves in me, I judge him not because I did not come to judge the world.” To ‘judge’ someone else is to lay claim

to perfection in yourself, which is a quality even Christ reserves for a deity. The most poignant embodiment of this is when Jesus observes a woman about to be stoned for adultery. He perceives that the people persecuting her are scarcely better themselves and demands that only “he who is without sin may cast the first stone.” They drop their stones in self-conscious embarrassment and his point is made.

The blood-thirsty masses were, of course, blaming the woman for what they hate about themselves. It pleased them enormously to persecute another because the ‘worse’ she was the ‘better’ they were by comparison. A truly spiritual man, however, has dispensed of the ego and has no desire to score points off others. Although he may still make judgments of a kind, they accord with a higher faculty and tend to be less self-serving. This is the “clear vision” that Jesus aspired to when he lamented, “You see the speck in your brother’s eye yet overlook the great plank in your own!” A man does not have the authority to judge others until he has perfected his own existence. Whenever a Christian implies that I’m “going to hell”, I counter that he’s going to hell for telling me that I’m going to hell! A literal interpretation of scripture suggests nothing less.

When he’s not reprimanding others, the religious man’s ego also manifests itself more subtly in the desire to feel special. We often see this in the way converts dive headlong into a new style of dress and surround themselves with other paraphernalia. James Twyman makes the point that this is actually quite an ‘egotistical’ thing to do, because it means you associate spirituality with a certain image and look outside of yourself for it. Such people are invariably compensating for the fact that they have no spirituality WITHIN themselves. That often goes for

the words that come out of their mouths too. When a man makes a point of quoting chapter and verse and becomes excessively pedantic, he's invariably compensating for the fact that he doesn't EMBODY the wisdom in question. Endless chatter is the only level on which his spirituality exists at all. The volume goes up when the broadcast is weak.

I was once in the company of a German man who had embraced Hinduism. He suddenly fancied himself as a 'guru' of some kind and sought to build up a group of followers that he could hold court with. He had all the costumes, music, and incense sticks – but none of the wisdom! He sat there spouting vague clichés from the *Bhagavad Gita* which he had barely understood himself, and then held a “group meditation” too noisy to be of any benefit. It was a classic case of “too many chiefs and not enough Indians.” The minute somebody enters a spiritual path, their thoughts turn to ‘leading’ others when they should be busy about perfecting themselves. A ‘master’ is not so called because he's the ‘master’ of others – it refers to the fact that he has mastered HIMSELF! Specifically his ego.

This is the attitude that Jesus was critical of at *Matthew 6:5* when he said, “Be not like the hypocrites in the synagogue who flaunt their religion.” He knew all too well that religious people could be insufferable hypocrites who had their priorities wrong. Atheists haven't stumbled upon anything new when they denounce their religious opponents as such. As we've already seen, excessively pious individuals defy scripture so badly that they can barely be called ‘religious’ at all! Richard Dawkins makes the point that there's no such thing as a “Muslim child” so much as “a child of Muslim parents”. If

we must make that distinction then we might also acknowledge that there's a difference between "religious people" and "people who appear to be religious". The well-travelled Islamic commentator, Muhammad Abdu, summed this up perfectly when he declared, "In France, I saw Islam but no Muslims. In Egypt, I see Muslims but no Islam."

When asked if I'm 'religious', I always find myself insisting that I'm "too religious to be religious" – because true religion is almost unrecognizable from its dogmatic counterpart! And yet, unfortunately, the latter is all that most people are ever exposed to. Although I have a sound understanding of and a deep respect for all the world's major faiths, even I don't feel comfortable in their places of worship. I spend so much time worrying about some petty ritual or other that I barely think of God at all! They seem to be in danger of becoming hives of pedantry where rules are more important than sincerity and conviction. This is the attitude that Guru Nanak (the founder of Sikhism) was critical of when he refused to take part in a tiresome Hindu ceremony and insisted, "Let mercy be the cotton, contentment the thread, continence the knot, and truth the twist." For him (like most other spiritual masters), rituals were secondary to the qualities they were meant to engender. It's what Muslims refer to as the "inner reality" as opposed to the "outer law".

Religious conviction doesn't always have its roots in insecurity and egotism though. At its best, preaching is the sincere desire to better someone else's life to the extent that yours has been bettered. Religion can have a profoundly positive effect on an individual, which is as hard to keep quiet about as a winning lottery ticket! As Muhammad Ali famously insisted, "When a rooster sees the light it crows – and I'm

crowding.” The trick is to embody the wisdom in question so that its validity is never in doubt. You must become an impressive individual to whom others are naturally receptive. To this end, Islam talks about the need to broach the subject of religion “graciously” and to discuss it “in a pleasant manner” so as to give a good account of yourself. Anything less is easily criticized and rejected.

Islam is often accused of being a ‘proselytizing’ religion as insufferable as Christianity, but it originally had more in common with Judaism’s self-confidence. Under Muhammad’s guidance, it was essentially a means of civilizing Arabia and scarcely expanded beyond those borders. *Surah 16:92* of the *Qur’an* specifically cautions against arbitrarily clocking up converts, insisting that sincerity is more important than “keeping the numbers up”. As surely as Jews consider themselves an elite club, it was also an honour to be a committed Muslim and converts needed little persuasion. As Ishaq relates, “When men met in peace, none talked intelligently about Islam without entering into it.”

It wasn’t until the 8th century (a century after Muhammad’s death) that a powerful new empire began seeing the outside world as a “House Of War” that must be converted by the sword. Naturally, this doesn’t do the religion in question justice because it implies its qualities are not self-evident and must be enforced. Anything achieved by coercion is temporary and will fall apart as easily as it was created. If a man embraces something of his own volition, however, the allegiance enjoys a longer lifespan – and a more productive one. It is for this reason that *Surah 2:256* explicitly commands, “There must be no compulsion in religion.”

It is often the case that the secular individual is unusually sensitive to the imposition of preaching. As surely as they endow religion with a dark side it doesn't really have, the atheist also perceives 'preaching' where there is none. From my own experience, I know for a fact that it is impossible to mention the words 'Jesus' or 'Christ' without being dismissed as a *Bible*-bashing fanatic! A good example is a videogame I made in 2008 called *The You Testament*, which controversially depicted the life of Christ. Rather predictably, my critics accused me of attempting to 'brainwash' my young audience. The irony was that the game actually CHALLENGED orthodox Christian beliefs! The product's description even conceded as much: "Neither pious nor blasphemous, *The You Testament* is a thought-provoking challenge of what you thought you knew." But as far as the cynics were concerned, any project that featured Christ could only be obsequious propaganda. The name alone sends a cold shiver down their spine and leaves them incapable of engaging in a rational discourse.

I also see this in my new role as a religious educator. Like the videogame, people assume anything that has 'religion' in the title can only be in favour of it and only exists to indoctrinate. In our secular culture, this leads to calls for religious education to be withdrawn from our schools. Again, the irony is that religious 'education' is the exact OPPOSITE of religious 'indoctrination'. It's not my agenda to make someone religious any more than a history teacher is intent on churning out Nazis by studying World War II! The object of study is quite separate from the act of subscribing to it.

If anything, religious education is critical of the world's various faiths and requires an objective assessment of their inner workings.

People often assume I must be devoutly ‘religious’ to be involved in such a field, but I doubt I could do my job properly if I was. The only prerequisite is a broad understanding of ALL belief systems (including secular ones). Those that rail against religious education the most are actually the reason it is so important because their views are woefully ill-informed. As with all prejudices, an aversion to religion goes hand in hand with a weak understanding of it and a lack of exposure. Even if religion was a marauding force for evil, that would be an argument for MORE education on the subject rather than less!

I marvel when people assume I’m trying to ‘convert’ them when the subject of religion is broached. Even if they’re the ones that instigate it by curiously asking me a question, their eyes and their body language request that I keep at an intellectual distance! As we’ve already seen, there’s a lot of insecurity in matters of religion. People are instinctively dismissive of it in the same way that it’s not ‘cool’ to be well educated or politically active. This self-destructive attitude follows us into adulthood from the playground. It’s what Hindus term ‘vikarna’ – a distaste for that which is good for you, as surely as a child spits out vegetables.

I was once watching Mel Gibson’s *Passion Of The Christ* at home when my two housemates entered the room at separate intervals. The first one that entered alone was deeply respectful of the subject matter and began asking sincere questions. But the minute the other arrived, the atmosphere instantly changed and they both began mocking Christ’s impending death and crucifixion. They playfully asked whether they were “going to hell” for doing so, and I bluntly informed them that they were ALREADY in hell. ‘Hell’ was the insecurity that

made them betray their true feelings in order to look good in front of one another. ‘Hell’ was also the discomfort they would feel when left alone with me once more!

Like the proverbial ‘Judas’, secular people really do betray themselves with their awkward relationship with religion. They cannot bear to engage with it on any level whatsoever. Such people fret about being ripe for conversion, but the irony is that nobody would want them anyway! As surely as criminals aren’t fit to join the army, spiritual criminals don’t have the wherewithal to live a disciplined existence. I marvel when people assume I’m trying to ‘convert’ them because I seldom credit them with being able to follow in my footsteps. It’s like assuming an astronaut is trying to recruit you whenever he speaks of space.

It’s a myth that religion is meant for everybody. Although anybody can benefit from its core principles, it takes an extraordinary effort to draw out its true value. The Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* makes the point that “only one in a thousand seek God” – and of those only a further “one in a thousand” actually succeed. Spiritual masters are quite literally “one in a million”! Similarly, Jesus speaks of the ‘narrow’ path that ‘few’ are able to walk. Like becoming a *Jedi* knight in *Star Wars*, spiritual mastery is an honour reserved for an elite few. Piety is a rarity, as I like to put it. It could be argued that religion is TOO popular in this respect, because millions of people lay claim to a spiritual stature that they almost certainly don’t have. That is the fundamental error of indiscriminate preaching. You take something valuable and dilute it. “Casting pearls before swine,” as Jesus put it.

It is for this reason that I do not set out to ‘convert’ atheists with this book. I apologize if it has come across that way at any point. As an educator, my only mandate is to ensure that people have intelligent opinions about religion – whether those opinions are positive or negative. Although I passionately believe in God and the value of religion, I have no desire to force anybody else to inherit those views. You either do it of your own volition or you don’t do it at all. I would be very insecure if it personally mattered to me either way! And if we’ve learnt one thing from this chapter, it’s that an insecure person isn’t worth listening to...

12. MAKING A PROPHET

“An enlightened man leaves no more traces
of existence than a bird in the air.”

- *The Dharmapada* (v92)

Atheism is a slippery slope that leads one to assume that God’s son is as ‘fictitious’ as God himself. It never ceases to amaze me how many cynical individuals dispute the existence of Jesus and other religious figures. For the record, no historian worth his salt would doubt the existence of anyone from Moses onwards. As Michael Poole insists, “There is more written evidence for the events surrounding the life of Jesus than for anyone else of comparable antiquity.” The one and only question mark is whether he was the greatest human being that ever lived... or something more than ‘human’?

Upon concluding that he definitely wasn’t the latter, atheists also find themselves assuming that he wasn’t the former either. In fact, he’s often accused of not existing on any level whatsoever! True to form, we’re treated to some wildly irrational reasoning here. A cynical mind can stagger to this pitiful conclusion down one of several pathways. The weakest (and yet somehow most popular) is, “I don’t believe Jesus worked miracles or rose from the dead... therefore he didn’t exist.” Er, wouldn’t a more rational response be that those particular details about the life of Jesus aren’t entirely true? The idea that “if one thing is wrong then everything is wrong” is profoundly irrational. We’ve already seen it in the way atheists behold the story of creation.

It’s perfectly possible to be exposed to false information about someone without them vanishing off the face of the earth. If someone

were to write the story of your life they would no doubt get a handful of details wrong. Hell, even if you wrote your own autobiography you may find yourself taking liberties with the truth! But it doesn't follow that you cease to exist once these errors have seeped into the world. Nor does it even mean the events in question didn't occur on some level. Like God himself, the object of scrutiny exists independent of a mortal's fallible investigation.

That's not to say I think the events surrounding the life of Jesus are erroneous fabrications, I hasten to add. I'm just playing devil's advocate here. I went through phases where I assumed Jesus' miracles had to be authentic, then I went through phases where I considered them entirely symbolic. I still favour their symbolic meaning because that isn't in doubt. But what I've learnt about energy also satisfies me that ANYTHING is possible.

We scoff at miracles nowadays, but there's actually something quite scientific about them. In fact, it's often argued that there's no such thing as a 'miracle' because even they adhere to the laws of the universe – just not in ways that we would recognize. If everything in the material world is a manifestation of energy, as quantum physics invites us to believe, then 'miracles' simply become the ability to manipulate that energy. Even Richard Dawkins concedes as much in the closing pages of *The God Delusion*. It becomes a question of 'how' rather than 'if'. Considering that 'thoughts' are kind of energy, we can assume that a sufficiently powerful thought (such as that of an enlightened prophet) has material consequences that pass for a 'miracle'. All I'll say is that I think we'd be surprised at just how true the miracle accounts are.

In addition to assuming that miracles defy science, people also appeal to personal experience to rule them out. Given that we have never seen a miracle and are incapable of working them ourselves, we assume there cannot possibly be any truth to them. Like all secular arguments, this makes sense at first but falters under closer examination. As reasonable as it is to ask why we've never witnessed a miracle, we might also ask why we think we're qualified to? If miracles WERE possible, would a bunch of cynical, materialistic westerners really be worthy of tapping into such power? Miracles might very well be possible among the spiritual masters of the Himalayas, where matter has been reduced to a play-thing. Only those that are ensnared by matter fail to see how it can be manipulated. It goes back to what I was saying about the miracle of God's existence – sometimes the people that demand something the most are the ones that deserve it the least. It also ties into the 'egotism' we explored in preceding chapters. Anything an atheist hasn't seen doesn't exist, and anything they cannot do cannot be done. This attitude is an obstacle to achieving most things – let alone miracles!

Despite their apparent prominence, the miracles aren't actually that important anyway. The way people talk about it, you'd think Jesus said nothing and did nothing in his 33 years on this planet other than work the odd miracle! The reality is that miracles make up about 10% of his story. Personally, I could take them or leave them. Disprove every single one of them tomorrow and I'd shrug my shoulders. That solid 90% chunk of moral reasoning is still there and is never going away. You can't even prove that someone else uttered those words without that individual being hailed as a genius! In that sense, Jesus truly did

survive his own death. We're still talking about him some 2'000 years later – long after Caesar's materialistic empire had crumbled. This is the contrast that the *Qur'an* seeks to make with the advice, "Travel the earth and see what was the end of those who denied truth."

In light of today's entertainment-based celebrity culture, Jesus is often dismissed as some sort of biblical 'showman'. People hear that he performed tricks while surrounded by people and assume he was merely the David Blaine of his day. Some smug magicians even attempt to discredit his legacy by recreating such feats. This misses the point on a number of levels. We've already established that miracle-working was the LEAST of Christ's achievements. As Thomas of Celano remarked when defending his decision not to recount the miracles of St Francis, "Miracles do not produce sanctity but merely manifest it." Virtue comes first and remarkable achievements naturally flow from there. As Jesus himself put it, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all else will be added unto you."

He was an inspired thinker first and foremost, so a political comparison would be more appropriate than anything as tawdry as entertainment (although still not entirely so). Indeed, Gandhi's exploits in India are perhaps the most tangible example we have of a Christ-like existence. I've always found it remarkable that people dispute the existence of Jesus when a man who embodied his principles existed as recently as the mid 20th century! Gandhi made the wisdom of non-violence and modest living plain to see – along with the fatal consequences of putting your head above the parapet. There can be no greater proof that a life such as this also played out 2'000 years ago.

In addition to the miracles being secondary, we're also told that

Jesus went to great pains to PREVENT people from focusing on the ones that he did. He did almost all of them behind closed doors in trusted company, and invariably told people to “tell no one of what you have seen”. It’s what is known as the “Messianic secret”. He knew all too well that his reputation could precede him in the worst possible way. For a start, people would begin focusing on the tawdry miracles instead of the divine wisdom behind them (and indeed they did, much to his dismay). As the *Qur’an* points out, this approach actually increases man’s fascination with worldly things instead of putting it in perspective like religion is supposed to. The miracles were aimed at infantile minds. Intelligent adults are supposed to thirst for the wisdom that accompanied them.

Above all else, it was downright dangerous to make a spectacle of yourself in an outpost of the barbarous Roman Empire (as we know all too well in hindsight). We might associate fame with success in this day and age, but back then being a public figure of any kind merely increased your chances of being persecuted for one reason or another. Jesus clearly didn’t want to bring that upon himself until the time was right. People didn’t do things “for fun” the way they might nowadays. Day-to-day existence was fairly humourless and sincerity was paramount. This is one of the reasons that the testimony of his disciples was taken so seriously. Why would they lie? They were systematically tortured and suffered the most horrendous deaths for what they believed in. It’s not the kind of thing you would bring upon yourself for no good reason.

If nothing else, it would be insecure to crave the attention of the public – and an insecure man would inherently cease to be wise, which

Jesus clearly was. Or at least that's how Christians perceive him. Another key reason that atheists dispute the existence of Jesus is that they simply don't agree with him. Again, you've got to admire the twists and turns of their logic! Anybody you dislike or disagree with doesn't exist? Wishful thinking I suspect.

More precisely, they disagree with what people have said and done "in the name" of Christianity – because the man himself said very little that would offend our sensibilities. The closest you can get to being upset with Jesus is resenting being told that you're "going to hell" for one reason or another. But as we shall see in a chapter dedicated to this fiery destination, even those objections are unwarranted.

When people criticize Christianity, their quarrel is invariably with St Paul and other founding members of the Early Church. It's just that critics are incapable of separating Jesus the man from Christianity as a force of nature in its own right. To do so would require intelligence and rational thought. A popular example is the resistance to homosexuality, which is synonymous with Christianity but was expressed by everyone EXCEPT Christ! Homosexuality is denounced in *Leviticus* under the penmanship of Moses, and then later in a couple of stray letters written by St Paul. In between these two time periods, Jesus can be found standing up for the oppressed and persecuted of ANY persuasion. Although it's probably fair to say that he wouldn't have been impressed with lust – whether it manifests itself in homosexuality or heterosexuality.

Christianity is also synonymous with dogmatic institutions that wield a sinister amount of power. Again, the irony is that Jesus spent his entire adult life rebelling against those things! In fact, that's

precisely the reason he died. Elements of his Jewish community were as stubborn and unreasonable as we behold fundamentalist Christians to be now. He exposed the folly of their penchant for rules, pointing out that it was the thought that counts. At *Matthew 6:5* he advises, “Be not like the hypocrites in the synagogue that flaunt their religion.” When people become disillusioned with organized religion in this day and age, they should find solace in Christ’s words instead of throwing the baby Jesus out with the bathwater!

Even when people are captivated by the character of Jesus, it’s often said that there’s very little “historical evidence” for them to get their teeth into. This is true on some levels. There’s much we would like to know for sure about Jesus that we simply cannot get our hands on. However, the call for proof is a little unfair because it’s hard to vouch for the existence of ANYBODY that lived that long ago (save for those who held positions of worldly authority, which Jesus blatantly didn’t).

There’s a charming saying in Buddhist scripture, which states that “an enlightened man leaves no more traces of existence than a bird in the air.” I feel this applies to Jesus and most other religious figures. When a man makes a point of not having any possessions in this world, what kind of material evidence can we realistically expect to find? As Jesus himself said, “My kingdom is not of this world.”

As far as cynics are concerned, what it essentially boils down to is that we don’t have video footage of this guy pottering around and talking! We have everything else you would expect from such a life. More words have been written about him than any other human being that ever walked the earth. And historically speaking, what’s interesting

is that even his detractors acknowledge his existence – which rules out the idea that his disciples were pedalling fiction.

Josephus, the most reliable Jewish historian of Jesus' time, makes the following contribution in *Antiquities Of The Jews*: “Ananus assembled the Sanhedrin of judges and brought forth before them the brother of Jesus who was called Christ.” Later, in *The Jewish War*, he writes: “A man appeared at that time, if it is right to call him a man – such were the extraordinary miracles he performed.” The famed Roman historian, Tacitus, also acknowledges the existence of Christ with similar passages.

If Jesus' life was in any way fabricated then disinterested writers such as these would have either ignored the stories or denounced them as false. They do neither and simply acknowledge that Jesus was an extraordinary man that they didn't know what to make of. What we have here is proof that the claims made about Jesus survived peer review. If you went to Israel now and tried to pedal a lie of this magnitude, a million people would have exposed you as a liar by tomorrow morning. That was as true 2'000 years ago as it is today, and it simply didn't happen in the case of Jesus. As the Jewish authorities are said to concede in *Acts 4:16*, “These events are notable to all who dwell in Jerusalem and we cannot deny them.” Nobody disputes that Jesus existed – they simply dispute the nature of his existence.

It is often pointed out that the accounts of Jesus' life ‘contradict’ each other, which is true – but only in the way that we would expect ANY two historical accounts to differ. Again, if a dozen people disappeared to write the story of your life in different places at different times, there would be all kinds of inconsistencies. Grab a handful of

different biographies about any one celebrity and see for yourself! That's precisely why there are 4 different 'Gospels' in the *New Testament*. If they were all 100% identical, we would only need one. Each has been carefully chosen to represent a different point of view. Mark's is the earliest and most matter of fact, Matthew's is the most elaborate and draws parallels with the *Old Testament*, Luke's is the most thorough that puts things in a historical and political context, and John's is the deepest and most spiritual. By standing in 4 different places they point to the truth in the midst of them.

Quite frankly, as with God herself, we wouldn't be having this conversation if Jesus didn't exist. There's a reason we're talking about him instead of the hundreds of other revolutionaries from that time. There's an authenticity to his teachings that billions of people find appealing to this day. Richard Swinburne's "principle of credulity" dictates that people tell the truth more often than not. It's only our thirst for conspiracy and intrigue that makes us ignore what is plain to see. The *Qur'an* makes this point in *Surah 11*, where it is noted that people that accuse others of lying are more likely to be liars themselves! They're said to "deal in falsehood" and view everything through their own prism of negativity.

At the end of the day, there's no smoke without fire. Even the legend of Santa Claus has its roots in fact! St Nicholas was a generous old man who pottered around Turkey not long after Jesus' time. An extravagant *Coca Cola* campaign 1'800 years later doesn't compromise the original man's existence. Nor does a sour attitude to religion compromise the life enshrined therein.

When people dismiss the *Bible* as 'fiction', I find it remarkable that

they don't hail it as a GREAT work of fiction. Surely it is indeed the "greatest story ever told" whether you believe it is true or not? Even Richard Dawkins concedes that this is so. But in their haste to distance themselves from religion, less intelligent atheists insist that the whole thing is without merit. The irony is that neither the *Old Testament* nor the *New Testament* are 'books' in the conventional sense. They each consist of DOZENS of separate books, interspersed by poetry and letters. the *Bible* doesn't contain the hallmarks of a work of entertainment and isn't comparable to 'fiction' as we would normally understand it. The clue is in the title *Testament* – it's the 'testimony' of people trying to preserve historical episodes in any way they see fit.

Religious stories are often dismissed as 'myths', but in scholarly circles a 'myth' is merely an elaborate way of telling the truth – so it's actually quite an appropriate term! The trivial details may be questionable but the key ingredients remain intact. The facts surrounding the life of Jesus are these: A wise Jewish philosopher was born into an oppressive Roman regime and grew up to encounter religious bigotry, he rebelled against both simultaneously with a message of compassion and common sense – and courageously sacrificed his life to this end.

It's a dark day in the history of a civilization when a life such as this isn't worth commemorating. We crucify him all over again on an annual basis every time we fail to do so. This is perhaps the symbolism of the 'Nativity' story. A great life comes to our door in a state of vulnerability, but we protest that there's "no room at the inn." No room in our lives, our hearts, or our minds for a man we would prefer to think didn't exist...

13. OUT OF THE FIRE

“Hell is not a place so much as a state of separation from God.”

- Pope John Paul II

In any other area of life, disagreements such as those between theists and atheists would be of very little consequence. Each party could “agree to disagree” and merrily go their separate ways. However, in matters of religion the prospect of an ‘afterlife’ forces us to contemplate consequences that go far beyond the here and now. Specifically, a disagreeable afterlife that one is keen to avoid! This is why preaching and religious observance can be charged with such zeal. Far from being a desirable lifestyle choice, worshipping the ‘right’ God in the ‘right’ way literally becomes a matter of life or death. The pious individual is not only trying to ‘save’ himself but everyone else around him. He perceives a train roaring down the tracks and races to prevent any unnecessary devastation.

The atheist, on the other hand, is satisfied that there is no impending train-wreck that should inform our actions. For them, the only ‘Hell’ worth worrying about is a waste of THIS life! Even if they do dignify the idea of such a fiery destination, they see it as proof of a vindictive deity who isn’t worth worshipping anyway. It’s then not much of a leap to assume that the ogre in question doesn’t exist at all. Our conviction that something is (or isn’t) so tends to be commensurate with our desire for it to be so. An atheist’s rejection of religious ideas is as ‘wishful’ as a believer’s blind acceptance of them.

Nowhere is this more prevalent than in responses to the doctrine of ‘Hell’, which often informs atheistic views. Not least because disbelievers are often told they’re going there! As we saw in an earlier chapter, an insecure preacher’s first line of attack is to exalt himself as ‘saved’ whilst denouncing his opponent as ‘damned’. The encounter then becomes poisonous and the victim of this tirade must resolve to distance himself from all things religious. As we established, however, this is an inarticulate response because a judgmental individual can’t accurately be described as ‘religious’. God and the afterlife might very well exist regardless of what any mortal says and how annoyed we are by it. As I conceded, even I am often told that I’m “going to hell” for one reason or another! But I don’t respond by doubting God’s existence, or even the existence of hell. I simply disagree with the particular interpretation of those things that I’ve been confronted with.

In London, a secular organization famously paid for buses to be emblazoned with the message, “God probably doesn’t exist so stop worrying.” The woman responsible claimed she was motivated to do it by a slew of anguished letters from lapsed religious believers who feared divine retribution. Her view was that the existence of God and hell must be brought into question because such concepts were having a negative effect on people rather than the positive one intended.

In typically atheistic fashion, this logic is risible. Wouldn’t it be more reasonable to call for a better understanding of such concepts? Something doesn’t cease to exist simply because we find it disagreeable! As Michael Poole puts it, “The solution to abuse is not disuse but responsible use.” If I’m hit over the head with a frying pan, it’s not accurate to say that frying pans are instruments of evil! It’s

more accurate to say that a frying pan has been abused and used out of context. Similarly, religion remains benevolent in the face of malevolent applications of it. Atheists weaken their own argument by swinging the hammer of cynicism so indiscriminately. Knee-jerk reactions are seldom on sure footing.

Evidently, there's a lot of misunderstanding as to what religions actually mean by 'Hell'. All major faiths have a concept of sin having negative consequences that pass for hell – even if it comes to pass in this life rather than the hereafter. As the Buddhist *Dharmaparda* intones, “An evil man suffers in this life AND the next.” There's nothing especially paranormal about this – it merely refers to the fact that an irrational, immoral person brings misery on himself and others. We also see this sentiment in the *Qur'an* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Even Pope John Paul II conceded that “Heaven and Hell are not places so much as states of mind on earth.” We know something of them in this life regardless of whether or not our souls experience them on a grander scale.

The “fire and brimstone” that most people associate with hell can be attributed largely to Jesus in the *New Testament* and Muhammad in the *Qur'an*. They repeatedly caution that sinners will “burn in the flames of hell” for one reason or another. At a glance, this sounds like melodramatic scaremongering – something that critics already closely associate with religion. Indeed, there can be no doubt that institutions like the Catholic Church have used the threat of damnation as an effective tool. Not only did it inspire people to fight in the Crusades in a misguided effort to “absolve their sins”, but it also brought in a tidy profit back home as ‘indulgences’ allowed people to effectively ‘buy’ a

favourable afterlife for their departed loved ones! The daunting prospect of hell effortlessly motivated people to part with their lives AND their money. Cynics are in error when they bluntly assume this is what religion was invented for, however. Again, it is more accurate to say that such abuses are an ugly by-product of an otherwise honourable institution.

As farcical as images of hell might seem, they do have their roots in fact. The ‘flames’ of hell are an effective way of imparting several spiritual truths. For a start, ‘burning’ with regret is a good way of describing the agonizing effect that sin has on the mind and body. It’s no coincidence that this is also the very word that Buddha favoured when describing the effect that ‘passions’ had on one’s psyche. He regarded a sense-enslaved individual to be ‘afame’ with irrational desires that needed to be extinguished.

The idea of a ‘flame’ also hints at the spiritual fabric of an afterlife, which we shall discuss in greater detail in the next chapter. Whether we believe in the existence of the soul or not, most people conceive of such a thing as a flicker of ‘energy’ that would pass for a benign flame. Indeed, esoteric teachings often refer to it as a “body of light”. The significance of a fiery hell, then, is that we’re surrounded by powerful energies that have been misused and endowed with negativity. The ‘flames’ of our sinful nature fuel those of others and create a billowing inferno of bad company.

Indeed, Jewish concepts of hell (to which Jesus would have been referring) were based on an actual place in Palestine called ‘Gehenna’. It became a dumping ground for dead bodies, where they were then disposed of in mass cremations. As flames licked at the rotting flesh of

corpses and emitted a foul stench, it would become symbolic of a place you didn't want to be! That's essentially what people are trying to convey with hellacious imagery – a profound sense of discomfort, physically and mentally. We see this in *Surah 18:29* of the *Qur'an*, which describes hell as “an uncomfortable couch to recline on.”

If there is an afterlife, it stands to reason that our exploits in this life will set the tone for the next one. Not in the trivial sense that we ‘deserve’ a punishment from on high, so much as we ‘create’ one for ourselves through negligence. There's clearly a discrepancy between the body's perspective and that of the soul. It's what Neale Donald Walsch calls “Who We Really Are”. Upon discovering “who we really are” at the moment of death, our mortal exploits take on a new significance. We realize we were ‘connected’ to the people we hurt and must feel the full impact of those blows. We realize the human body was capable of extraordinary things and lament not fulfilling our true potential. And inversely, we realize that we wasted our time obsessing about things that don't particularly matter.

Discoveries of this kind pass for ‘Hell’ for those who have a lot to regret. It's a mental discomfort as much as a physical one. The *Qur'an* repeatedly makes this point by referring to our mortal deeds as a ‘scroll’ that we are obliged to read. It makes uncomfortable reading for most people! It turns out that the ‘judge’ on Judgment Day is YOU. It is for this reason that *Surah 17* poetically says, “Sufficient is thy soul this day to make a case against thee.”

Similarly, if we indulge the body at the expense of the soul we can expect a physically uncomfortable transition from one realm to another. The best definition of hell I ever heard was when Paramahansa

Yogananda described it as “needing a body and not having one”. I think that sums it up. The materialist gives so much credence to the senses that to be without them at the moment of death is a kind of hell! The spiritual individual, on the other hand, has already put life in perspective and beholds the exact same experience to be liberating. An obsession with all things material merely weighs us down, whereas being free of such baggage allows us to fly. It’s like a drug addict going “cold turkey”. For him, being without drugs is a kind of hell. For his clean-living counterpart, being without drugs is of no consequence and is actually preferable. The *Qur’an* riffs on this by having Allah metaphorically slay ‘death’. Once death no longer exists, are you happy with where your soul finds itself for the foreseeable future?

As we’re already beginning to see, ‘Heaven’ and ‘Hell’ are essentially two different responses to the same thing. This means it has more to do with us than God, who is essentially a brick wall that we bang our heads against. We cite the prospect of hell as an argument AGAINST God’s benevolence, but the irony is that it could be construed as a good thing. Another reason that hell is often referred to as a ‘fire’ is because that’s exactly what God’s creation is. The cosmos is a fire that only ever promised light and warmth. It is WE who mishandle that energy and unleash its devastating effects. This is why the *Qur’an* repeatedly cautions, “We have PREPARED the fire for you.” It’s a careful choice of words because it refers to a system that was in place BEFORE we chose to abuse it. This extricates God from being as ‘judgmental’ and ‘vindictive’ as critics like to imply. He merely presides over a law that we are feeling the full force of. Indeed,

the *Qur'an* goes on to point out, "It is they who have wronged their own souls."

Many atheists protest that even this passive definition of hell betrays a malevolent deity who makes life an uphill struggle. It's so easy to fall foul of God's exacting standards that we can only assume he wants us to fail. That being the case, the journalist Andrew Marr protests that religion will always be guilty of "forging a divide between the saved and the ignorant damned." He leaves us to assume this is a bad thing, but neglects to elaborate as to why that might be. How could life work any other way? In what scenario is it possible to rail against God's existence AND benefit from it?! Cynics can't have it both ways. It is for this reason that Jesus insisted, "A man cannot serve two masters. He will always hate one and love the other." *Surah 18:50-51* of the *Qur'an* goes on to point out that God cannot conceivably accept such people as his 'helpers' because their aims are different. Or as Jesus put it, "A house divided amongst itself shall fall."

This is why I suspect atheists are indeed doomed to taste something of the 'Hell' they're often told they're headed to. It may seem unfair when we consider that they're perfectly nice people, but unfortunately for them that's not entirely the point. As we've already established, 'Hell' is a state of disorientation and discomfort. What could be more 'disorientating' than being somewhere you didn't think existed, in a form you didn't think was possible? And what could be more 'uncomfortable' than being in the presence of someone you don't like?! No matter how 'merciful' God is, it seems clear that the atheist brings a certain amount of misery on himself. Religion is the process of studying for a spiritual exam. Like a rebellious child, atheists

essentially deny there is such an exam and are left cramming for it at the last minute! That anxiety (and inevitable failure) is what passes for ‘Hell’. As Milton’s *Paradise Lost* intones, “The mind is its own place and in itself can make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven.”

The *Qur’an* goes one step further and makes the point that militant rebels must also take responsibility for “those they led astray” in addition to “bearing their own burdens”. Again, this seems harsh but is perfectly natural if you think about it. The sense of regret that comes from a poor choice is further exacerbated when you discover you affected thousands of others likewise. The ‘discomfort’ is compounded and the individual suffers accordingly. That’s not to say his cohorts remain entirely blameless. Their sense of misery is merely a notch less than that of their rueful leader. The *Qur’an* consistently places a lot of emphasis on free will and personal responsibility.

This is the logic behind “Pascal’s Wager”, which dictates that it’s better to assume God does exist even if she doesn’t – because there’s very little to lose and everything to gain. Even if we’ve studied for an exam that never took place, we can at least delight in the knowledge we have acquired and the skills we have developed. The only conceivable way an atheist could procure a pleasant afterlife is if he sincerely considered that there might be more to life than meets the eye, but then diplomatically concluded that this isn’t so. Anything more antagonistic is likely to backfire. As the *Tao Te Ching* intones, “Tension follows he who is contentious.”

It is often said that our attitude at the moment of death sets the tone for what follows. A good case in point is Buddhism, which sees life as a kind of “domino effect” whereby each moment informs the next one.

Merely contemplating God's existence at the moment of death is thought by many religions to be enough to steer us in a divine direction. This is especially true of Hinduism, whose *Bhagavad Gita* intones, "Whoever ends his life remembering me attains my nature." We might speculate that this is why Christians and Jews are attended to by clergymen on their deathbeds and receive "Last Rites" to reconcile themselves with God. This is also why Muslims desire for 'Allah' to be the last word they hear. It's all about putting this life into perspective and setting the right tone for the next one. Your attitude really does determine your latitude!

Another complaint atheists have about this seemingly fickle process is that its consequences are said to last for an 'eternity'. By punishing us for making one mistake at one crucial moment, God once again becomes disproportionately vindictive. There have been many well-meaning attempts to try and make sense of this injustice. St Anselm reasoned that it is only fitting that God's judgments be 'eternal' since God himself is 'infinite'. Those are simply the measurements he works with! Indeed, time cannot conceivably exist outside of a physical world so ANY spiritual concept of it must be 'eternal' and 'infinite'.

Another disclaimer is the Catholic doctrine of 'purgatory', which assures us there is a kind of "no man's land" betwixt heaven and hell. Here, ambivalent souls are denied the majesty of paradise but are also spared the full brunt of hell. They wallow in limbo before eventually knowing something of heaven if they work hard enough to improve their plight. Suffice to say, there is very little scriptural basis for this idea and it is rejected by Protestant denominations. It can be vaguely traced back to a legend about Jesus, which recounted how he liberated

the souls of those who had died in the generations prior to his incarnation.

As we've already established in preceding chapters, some Christians attach huge significance to the person of Jesus and cite his approval as being essential to a favourable afterlife. Without hesitation, they would imply that anyone who isn't a card-carrying Christian is scarcely better than an atheist and must know something of hell. We also see shades of this in Islam, which implies that anyone who fails to reform their religious views will regret it. As ever, this is a little misguided because heaven has more to do with uniting with God than ticking the right boxes! A man who vainly mutters "Jesus is my saviour" or "Muhammad is God's messenger" remains inferior to a truly spiritual individual who EMBODIES what those statements mean. The pious individual might very well find himself being held back by his ego, while open-minded people of every creed and culture parade past him. Indeed, a *Hadith* has Muhammad conceding that any virtuous person with a sincere believe in God will know something of 'paradise'. We're told he was worried that people would live a less disciplined life in other respects if they knew how easy it was.

All of this fretting about 'eternal' damnation is quite unnecessary anyway, because it doesn't refer to a punishment being 'permanent'. Rather, it refers to a wheel going round indefinitely – a wheel that a purified soul can extricate itself from at any time. This is the liberation that Hindus refer to as 'moksha'. The 'eternal' punishment of hell is the endless cycle of futile incarnations that a sinful man puts himself through. The misery is indeed 'eternal' until we choose to end it. Our actions won't mysteriously stop having consequences of their own

accord! Eternal damnation refers to being trapped in a self-destructive cycle with no desire to change things.

Inversely, developing an understanding of how life works is the brake that allows us to begin exerting control over this cycle. Heaven is referred to as “eternal life” for the same reason that hell is referred to as “eternal damnation”. Once you’ve negotiated your way to that plane, you remain there until you choose otherwise. As *Revelation 3:12* poetically puts it, “Thou shalt become a pillar in my temple and go out no more.” Though the enlightened individual may choose to incarnate again, he does so of his own accord rather than being forced to by some cosmic law. That luxury of choice is the definition of ‘Heaven’ whereas it’s absence is the definition of ‘Hell’...

14. NO EASY WAY OUT

“Religion eases pain, even as it created fantasies.”

- Karl Marx

Ricky Gervais is one of many comedians who has taken it upon himself to peddle misinformed anti-religious propaganda. When he's not making a fool of himself by wilfully misinterpreting scripture in his stage shows, he can be found taking pot-shots at religious belief in his self-penned television shows and movies. The most recent example is *The Invention Of Lying*, which spins the yarn of a solitary man who can 'lie' in a world full of credulous people. Rather predictably, it's not long before this powerful individual has invented the conceit of a "man in the sky" who looks after you when you die. Gervais proudly proclaims it to be a "big idea" – one that he neglects to acknowledge in the film's promotion so as to (presumably) increase its impact.

As with Richard Dawkins, I rather like Ricky Gervais despite his staunch atheism. He seems to be an honourable man in every other respect, and I certainly find his work entertaining. I only bring up his latest assault on religion because it's a popular angle that we will be addressing exclusively in this chapter. The idea that religion was fabricated to bring 'comfort' to people who fear dying or seek meaning is a seductive one. The secular thinker Karl Marx went down this road many times when he accused religion of "easing pain even as it created fantasies" and beheld it to be "the opiate of the masses". In a similar vein, many have denounced religion as "a crutch for the weak-minded."

However, the weakest links are the easiest to make and this lazy argument doesn't stand up upon closer inspection. For a start, it assumes that there's nothing more to religion than a vain belief in a benevolent deity and a pleasant afterlife. As with the miracles of Jesus, although these elements are undeniably woven into the fabric they only comprise a small part of it. 90% of religion is about moral reasoning – the art of cultivating virtues and eliminating vices. To discredit it because of the supernatural 10% you disagree with is scandalously misguided! It goes back to what we were saying about judging a book by its cover (or more precisely, the *Bible* by its opening chapter). With atheists, the focus is invariably on the wrong place.

If nothing else, it's blatantly a myth that the religious life is some sort of 'easy' option. On the contrary, the religious individual voluntarily makes their life harder because they no longer derive pleasure from material comforts and selfish deeds. They take the time to study an ancient text that most people can't be bothered to read, they make an appointment to congregate at a certain time and place every weekend, they selflessly give of their resources for the benefit of others, and they adhere to moral constraints that others are free from. Indeed, atheists are so quick to reject religion precisely because they perceive it to be unnecessarily difficult! Their argument is a self-defeating one. Religious people stand accused of "wishful thinking", but the atheist is guilty of 'wishing' God out of existence so that he is free to do as he pleases.

The irony is that the pages of history are littered with religious figures who suffered a life of unspeakable persecution. Let's forgo the fact that Jesus died the most horrific death the barbarous Roman

Empire could conceive, and let us turn our attention to the disciples. If all they were seeking was ‘comfort’, why didn’t they ‘comfort’ themselves that Jesus was mistaken and that God doesn’t exist? If all they wanted was an ‘easy’ life, why didn’t they choose to keep their heads down instead of bringing persecution and torture upon themselves? The answer is that religion has always been about courageously confronting the world instead of hiding from it. About doing that which is difficult instead of that which is easy. But the religious individual doesn’t begrudge this workload because they know it will lead to growth.

It’s rather like when people convince themselves not to go to the gym. Deep down, they know it’s hard work and they don’t want to do it. But those that resolve to put in the effort become fit and strong! Likewise, the religious man becomes spiritually strong by lifting heavy moral burdens. This is the most offensive thing about religious people being denounced as ‘weak-minded’. On the contrary, some of the greatest minds in history have shown the strength that comes from religious conviction – not least Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King in the 20th century. It would be a brave man that looked those individuals in the eye and dismissed them as ‘weak’. Indeed, the cynics are more ‘weak-minded’ when they spout vacuous clichés about things they know very little about.

In addition to being duty-bound to work harder, it’s also debatable that the religious individual derives pleasure from the idea of an afterlife. After all, as we saw in the previous chapter, we hear just as much about ‘Hell’ as ‘Heaven’! The individual is just as likely to experience an unpleasant afterlife as a pleasant one. Perhaps even more

so given that there are so many ‘sins’ for a fallible human to be found guilty of. Why would anybody taunt themselves with that prospect unless there was some credence to it? Our desire to believe that heaven DOES exist must surely be outweighed by our desire to believe that hell DOESN’T exist?! The cliché goes that our rulers use the threat of damnation to govern us by ‘fear’. But even if that were so, we could still use our freedom of mind to reject the idea.

It’s a myth that our lives suddenly get better upon dying. All of the world’s religions are agreed that our conduct in this life sets the tone for the next one. This is what Jesus meant when he told Peter, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” You don’t suddenly become a saint by virtue of being dead! Our conduct in this life is like an arrow being aimed, which is then sent soaring into infinity at the moment of release. It could just as easily carry us to a negative destination as a positive one. This is one of the many reasons that suicide is frowned upon in religious circles. It doesn’t wipe the slate clean. It merely triggers the ejector seat at an inappropriate time! As Jesus muses in the lesser known *Dialogue Of The Saviour*, “The work remains but the body does not.” This ‘work’ is synonymous with ‘karma’ and is thought to invite an unwelcome reincarnation.

The same goes for God himself. We’re told that he can be a stern father as well as a loving mother. Why would we invent the existence of an authority figure that may make our lives WORSE? Whichever way you cut it, fallible humans are more interested in making their lives easier rather than harder. We’re more interested in freeing ourselves of restraints rather than adding them unnecessarily. The very fact that the

teachings of religion are less than pleasant recommends them! They would look a lot different if they were purely works of self-serving fiction. Indeed, atheism is a more likely candidate for that dubious honour. It could be described as a ‘crutch’ for the immoral and self-satisfied! Our smug self-regard results in the lunatics running the asylum. As we established in an earlier chapter, the children want to lock the teacher away in a cupboard so that they can play. Atheism is the path of hedonistic self-destruction.

Even if religious beliefs do involve an element of “wishful thinking”, that doesn’t preclude them from being true. I can hope that something is so and still enjoy the fact that it IS so. For instance, I might ‘wish’ that my team wins the league and then see it come to pass. Their chances don’t plummet down to zero just because of my vain desire! Likewise, religious people are entitled to anticipate an afterlife that might very well exist. Similarly, the observation that religion can be abused to rule people by fear has no bearing on actual reality. It may be used to rule people by fear AND that fear may be justified. Despite the valiant efforts of atheists, something doesn’t cease to exist just because we happen to find it disagreeable!

It’s often said that even religious people don’t actually believe in God or an afterlife when it comes down to it because they fret about dying just as much as anyone else. This is a little unfair because it’s a human instinct to fear death so that we might prevent it at all costs. Although religion advocates that we overcome this irrational instinct, it takes a valiant effort to do so. Even Jesus temporarily fell short of it when he found himself on his knees in the Garden Of Gethsemane, praying that “this cup might pass from me.” He would later be heard

lamenting, “Why have you forsaken me?” on the cross in his final moments (although this is a rather poetic reference to *Psalms* 22).

That said, there’s certainly a lot of hypocrisy amongst the religious community. Great swathes of the faithful do indeed pay lip service to religion and then fail to embrace those beliefs when it really matters. Again, this is precisely because it is difficult to do so – which endorses the fact that religion is NOT the easy route. As *John 6:60* concedes, “This is a hard saying! Who could possibly live by it?” Nevertheless, a few valiant souls do embody religious principles fully and succeed in putting the material world into perspective. Just because something’s ‘hard’, it doesn’t follow that it’s ‘impossible’.

The truly virtuous can even be found rejecting heaven and embracing hell if they feel their actions warrant it! The beloved Islamic mystic, Rabi’ah, sought to worship Allah for only the purest of reasons and vowed not to be swayed by the prospect of heaven OR hell: “If I worship thee in fear of hell, burn me in hell. If I worship thee in hope of paradise, exclude me from it. But if I worship thee for thine own sake, withhold not thy beauty!” Religious people of this quality don’t think in the simplistic terms atheists accuse them of.

One of the reasons that the afterlife is so vehemently disputed is that it seems counter-intuitive. Even if we would like to believe that such a place exists, there is no ‘proof’ that it does. On the contrary, it seems more likely that it doesn’t. In this scientific age, it’s fashionable to only give credence to that which is material. This is known as ‘monism’ (or ‘non-dualism’) – the belief that there’s only ONE thing at work, and that one thing is physical rather than spiritual. This even extends to dismissing our thoughts and consciousness as some sort of

by-product of matter. In this view, it seems clear that nothing survives once the body itself has stopped producing these vivid imaginings.

The fatal flaw in this assumption is that it could just as easily be the other way around! Eastern philosophers agree that there is only “one thing”, but they propose that that one thing is MIND rather than matter. Shankara’s brand of monism, *Advaita*, dictates that consciousness is the only thing that’s real and matter is the illusion. The *Kena Upanishad* masterfully argues that “God is not that which is thought by the brain, but that by which the brain thinks.” Far from being a product OF the brain, God is the very power BEHIND the brain! Divinity comes first and the human brain merely channels it.

Cynics like to dismiss religious experiences as “figments of the imagination”. They don’t know how right they are! Just not in the negative way they allude to. The ‘imagination’ is indeed the greatest tool at the disposal of God (or the soul). As a creative individual, I certainly associate the existence of God with inspired thoughts. It allows our actions to be influenced in the subtlest possible way without our free will being compromised. As the *Qur’an* repeatedly claims, “The prophets were but men to whom we granted inspiration.” Divinity does indeed lurk within our minds, but it’s not a product of our lives. Rather, our lives are a product of IT – depending on how much of it we allow to shine through.

Science has been slowly backing this up throughout the 20th century and beyond. In this very book, we’ve touched on how everything is a product of ‘energy’ in some form or other – even thoughts. Wherever we find matter, we can successfully break it down into something less tangible. The same cannot be said of energy in its

purest form, which demands to be acknowledged as a building block rather than a product. This sums up the folly of atheism and materialism. That which is material is constantly being exposed as an illusion. As Gandhi mused, “The conviction is growing on me that God alone is real and all else is unreal.”

This has profound implications for our belief in an afterlife, because it seems feasible that an intelligent energy exists beyond the physical body. Indeed, that ‘energy’ is the only thing that ever really existed at all. We assume that the human body is some sort of ‘shell’ that contains a soul that leaks into oblivion once it is broken. It seems more likely that the body is a screen through which the light of the soul (or God) has always been shining. The 24th Surah of the *Qur’an* implies as much by comparing Allah to “a light encased in glass that seeks to shine with star-like brilliance.” Once the bodily instrument is torn by death, the light of the soul continues shining all the more brightly – and this is what passes for an afterlife. This is perhaps what is meant by the curious claim in the Gospels that “the veil of the temple was torn in two” upon Jesus’ death. The ‘veil’ in question is the illusion of separation between the body and the soul. One thing dies but another is liberated – rather like a butterfly emerging from the casing of its stint as a caterpillar.

In this view, the afterlife is simply a welcome return to a perspective that was temporarily obscured. The human body is like a pair of binoculars that we wear to focus on this worldly existence. But once the binoculars are removed, we return to enjoying a wider perspective and this passes for ‘Heaven’ (or ‘Hell’ if we don’t like what

we see!). The afterlife isn't somewhere we go TO – it's a place that we always were, lacking only the realization.

We might also talk about “surviving death” in THIS lifetime! It's true that this is possible on several levels. Poetically, we can speak of the child ‘dying’ and the adult being ‘born’. This feels true in many ways because they are entirely different passages of time within the one human lifespan. But it's also true on a literal, scientific level. As the scientist Steve Grand delights in pointing out, every single atom in your body has died and been replaced within the past 12 months – which means you're literally “not the same person” you were last year! You're constantly being rebuilt with new components. People should consider that when they deem the ‘resurrection’ of Christ to be so unlikely. You've already performed that particular miracle yourself a few dozen times!

Again, this is also a good argument in favour of the existence of the soul because something non-physical must be shaping that endless flow of energy. The soul might very well be the hypothetical clothes hanger upon which the garments of mortality are hung. It's what Indian religions refer to as the “astral body”. When this ‘astral’ body is no longer weighed down by the drag factor of the physical body, it beholds itself to be in ‘Heaven’ and lives a lighter existence in every sense of the word. But it's ready to don another disguise the moment its thoughts turn to the physical world again.

If there's any truth to the idea that one soul has always been shining throughout our many incarnations, we often wonder why we can't remember those previous experiences more vividly. Why is our memory located closer to the human brain than the immortal soul itself?

After all, that's supposed to be "who we really are" (as Neale Donald Walsch puts it). The cynical view is that the human brain is the only reality and that the soul doesn't actually exist. But this is a bold assumption because things wouldn't be any different even if reincarnation was a reality. It goes back to what we were saying about proving the existence of God in the first chapter. Even if God did exist, that existence couldn't be obvious because it would defeat the purpose. Likewise, reincarnation only works as a subtle, hidden process because a knowledge of previous lives would jeopardize our ability to focus on this one!

In my previous book, *Sportuality*, I used the analogy of a sportsman who puts each match behind him so that he can focus on the task at hand. If he obsessed about previous performances while playing in a new match, he would end up tackling opponents who aren't there and swinging at a ball he doesn't possess! There's a limit to how much you can allow the past to inform your current actions.

I also like to think of the soul as an actor who dons many costumes and plays many different roles throughout his career. Underneath he remains the same person – as surely as the soul remains the same within each body it inhabits. However, he must completely forget about the role he played last time. Not only is it inevitable because his attention has been drawn elsewhere, but it's essential if he is to play his new role properly. Suppose the actor started reciting old lines on a new project or wore old costumes to a new set! Chaos and confusion would ensue if he didn't put the past behind him as much as possible. I suspect this is what God seeks to shield us from.

Although our hypothetical performers must focus on the task at hand, they may make a concerted effort to revisit the past on tape. Perhaps this explains those of us who claim to be able to recount past lives. Although it's not recommended that we do so, it is nonetheless possible for those that dig tirelessly. Instead of identifying entirely with the physical body, the spiritual individual may identify more closely with the soul and receive its light more abundantly. This is the real gift that religion seeks to give us. A pleasant afterlife merely reflects the insight we achieve in this one...

15. MORAL MONOPOLY

“I want my lawyers, my servants, and even my wife to believe in God.

Then I think I shall be robbed and cuckolded less often.”

- *Voltaire*

One of the reasons people feel they can embrace atheism so confidently nowadays is that it seems perfectly possible to be ‘good’ without believing in God or following a religion. Indeed, many atheists are perfectly honourable – sometimes even more so than their pious counterparts! The *Qur’an* makes this concession when it sees fit to praise a mysterious pagan emperor called “Dhu al-Qarnayn” (who is thought to be Alexander The Great). Although he cannot be claimed as a devout religious believer, he nonetheless demonstrates the virtues that Muslims hold dear and effectively becomes one by proxy. History is littered with such figures who manage to achieve admirable things without a religious foundation. Indeed, they are often praised all the more for it because their altruism defies the odds. By comparison, those who are ‘compelled’ to be virtuous by religion deserve about as much praise as an obedient robot.

Science is also beginning to explain where morality fits into our psyche. Biologists like Richard Dawkins delight at illustrating how evolution has plenty of answers for it. Being co-operative and agreeable seems to be woven into our DNA because societies built on such principles are more likely to prosper than immoral, self-destructive ones. I should point out that Richard Dawkins himself is not entirely sold on this particular type of “group selection”, noting that it could just as easily be the other way round whereby valiant warriors are more

likely to perish than cunning cowards! Like the evolutionary argument against creation, it's also a "genetic fallacy" that's neither here nor there. The fact that evolution shapes our morality doesn't preclude the possibility that God intended it to achieve as much. It would be like crediting a chisel for creating a work of art instead of the sculptor! Similarly, Karen Armstrong makes the point that morality has flourished in the hands of religion even if it wasn't invented by it. She likens it to the way eating for survival has evolved into fine cuisine and the way running and jumping have evolved into athletics and dance. Something existing on a primitive level isn't an argument against celebrating where it evolved to under the guidance of another.

Nonetheless, religions have to account for the fact that many social advances have been made **DESPITE** religious beliefs rather than because of them. The past century has seen more strides forward than the past thousand years put together. Racism, misogyny, and homophobia have all become unacceptable in most civilized nations. Even war is not the free-for-all it once was and must now be fought within strict guidelines. It goes without saying that the average person also enjoys a quality of life that far surpasses their ancient counterparts. And all this from a world that is becoming increasingly secular.

The contrast is even more jarring when we contemplate what atrocities were being committed in the name of religion in the Middle Ages. Muslims and Christians alike were waging war at the drop of a hat, and back home religious institutions were torturing anybody who expressed an independent thought. But, as ever, these are all arguments against religion of a certain kind – i.e. an insincere kind that barely qualifies as 'religious' at all! The original teachings of most religions

remain beyond criticism. Indeed, they set the tone for many of the advances we're talking about here.

It's easy to scoff at the role of religion respectively after we've benefited from thousands of years of ethical thinking. I suspect the world would be an even darker place if religion hadn't graced the pages of history. All the liberties we cherish today were being called for thousands of years ago by spiritual visionaries (at a time when it wasn't remotely fashionable to do so, and was actually rather fatal). Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike campaigned for slavery to be abolished, for the poor to be treated compassionately, and for human beings to be treated equally regardless of race or gender. A belief that we're connected pieces of a divine puzzle demands nothing less. Even the religions that are synonymous with war, such as Judaism and Islam, can be credited with civilizing the human impulse to fight. The pay-off may have been a long time coming, but there can be no doubt that religious movements put in a lot of the ground work. Indeed, that's arguably how and why most religions came to prominence. It's social revolution of the grandest and most effective kind.

And yet religion need only occupy a small corner of our lives to effect this change. As Jesus himself put it, "With the faith of a mustard seed you can move mountains." We might very well speculate that the 'mountains' in question were the political landscape. His analogy of a "mustard seed" is also poignant because it was the smallest of all seeds and yet grew into one of the biggest of all crops. He was, of course, implying that this was the impact his humble movement would go on to have. The Russian priest Alexander Elchaninov likens Christianity to

the ‘yeast’ in a loaf of bread. It’s not the only ingredient, nor even the biggest one, but it is what makes it ‘rise’ and gives it shape.

Nonetheless, people now find themselves in this effortlessly moral climate and let go of the principles that got us here all too easily. They take their hands off the spiritual steering wheel for a few decades and observe that nothing particularly bad happened. They neither became a bad person, nor did an angry deity subject them to his wrath. “Who needs God or religion now?” we find ourselves reasoning. Indeed, this has become the mating call for atheists in the 21st century. The comedian Bill Maher marketed an ill-advised documentary called *Relig-ulous* based on that very premise.

In addition to being ungrateful in the extreme, this line of thinking assumes that the only role God or religion ever played was in churning out ‘good’ people. As we’ve already touched on in previous chapters, that’s not entirely the point. First and foremost, religion is about putting life into perspective and developing a relationship with the deity that presides over it. Being ‘nice’ and charitable is merely a by-product of this transformation. Clinging to one religious attribute at the expense of all others is a little short-sighted and misguided. It would be like buying a bottle of water and then declaring that water need no longer be piped directly into your home! Your chance experience of something in a foreign context isn’t an argument against it existing in a more consistent and reliable form. Religious morality is that fresh water. Its secular equivalent is a materialistic bottled product – one so costly that you must sell your soul for it.

We might also speculate that this secular brand of morality may not be around for long. The blood of virtue may still be pumping

through the body of humanity in the years after its religious head has been severed, but what about decades and centuries from now? Theoretically assuming that atheism continues to spread at its current rate (which I doubt), I suspect the consequences would be dire. The religious morality in our DNA would slowly ebb away to reveal a sickly corpse, utterly incapable of making life work in any meaningful way. In the irony to end all ironies, we would revert to being the savage beasts that scientists are so keen to convince us we are nothing more than. It would become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

For all the encouraging similarities between religious morality and secular morality, I feel there are some key differences that will eventually expose the latter to be inadequate. Marc Hauser and Peter Singer famously conducted an experiment along these lines, whereby the moral impulses of religious people were compared to those of atheists. They proudly revealed that each responded in largely the same way to various moral dilemmas, and that neither party could be said to be more virtuous than the other. Religion was therefore rendered irrelevant as a means of making us 'good'.

Again, this falls into the trap of assuming that being 'good' is the sole purpose of religion when there is in fact more to it than that. But more importantly, the experiment itself was deeply flawed as a means of detecting virtue. Indeed, as with most studies in this field, any experiment that sets out to measure a quality so intangible has its work cut out! This particular study slipped up in my view by asking glaringly obvious questions, to which only a psychopath would respond incorrectly. They were along the lines of, "Would you sacrifice 1 person to save 5 lives or would you allow 5 people to die to save 1

life?” Almost anybody, regardless of their beliefs, would respond in favour of saving numerous people instead of just one. The results, then, were an exercise in stating the obvious – and it went without saying there would be no difference between the two camps. They might as well have asked, “Are you a rapist?” or “Have you ever slit somebody’s throat?” By that logic, Richard Dawkins and I are as ‘virtuous’ as one another because neither of us packs a pistol!

However, I suspect the answers would have been more revealing if the questions riffed on religious principles like self-sacrifice or self-restraint. If it was YOU who had to die to save the 5 hypothetical others, I suspect more religious individuals would have remained true to their convictions while the atheists began back-peddalling. A materialistic world view positively encourages self-interest and egotism. Atheism carries with it an inherent belief that this life is all there is and must therefore be preserved at the expense of all others. As the Buddhist *Dharmapada* warns, “If a man scoffs at the idea of another world, there is no evil he won’t do.” A study that exposes the ugly consequences of secular character traits would make for more interesting reading.

And yet Richard Dawkins and co have the gall to assert that it is atheists who are more virtuous than their religious counterparts! One of the most jaw-dropping claims in *The God Delusion* (which is some feat) is that “there are more religious people in prison than atheists.” I suspect this is indeed statistically true (which is all scientists care about), but it’s obviously not SPIRITUALLY true. Although we find people embracing a pseudo-religious lifestyle once imprisoned, it’s not accurate to say they were devoutly religious at the time the crime was committed! Indeed, almost every conceivable crime is outlawed by one

religion or another so it's a contradiction in terms. It is, of course, more accurate to say that the criminal has embraced religion after the fact as a means of making his plight more bearable.

Richard Dawkins puts forth an accompanying argument, which is that some of the most conservative states in America are also the most beset by crime. Religious principles cannot therefore claim to make a society more virtuous, and must also go some way to accounting for a lack of virtue. But again, this only works as an argument against religion of a certain kind – namely the fundamentalist kind that has taken root in America. We shall explore this insincerity more deeply in a forthcoming chapter about terrorism. For now, it suffices to point out that the atheist is utterly incapable of distinguishing between sincere religion and its insincere counterpart.

If the atheist was capable of thinking rationally, he would of course see his ugly reflection in the darkest corners of society. It goes without saying that the average criminal or undesirable is a staunch atheist, devoid of a moral compass. Mention the word 'God' to a group of feral yobs and you will be howled at with derision. They may be less articulate, but there can be no doubt that they share a disdain for religious principles. This is the negative contingent that more intelligent atheists must accept as company. They have 'terrorists' of their own who reflect badly on them. Religious terrorists may destroy bodies, but secular terrorists slaughter souls! I'm not entirely sure which is worse.

For all the faults in execution, the honourable intentions of religion cannot possibly be disputed. In fact, it invariably stands accused of being TOO moral! The only conceivable argument against the religious

life is that it is unnecessarily disciplined and risks spoiling our fun for no good reason. Ludwig Feuerbach popularized this argument by insisting that “a belief in God deprives us of the REAL pleasures of this world,” and that we must concentrate on our own mortal interests instead. It’s a seductive argument, but not necessarily a valid one. The spiritual individual is often accused of ‘self-denial’, but it is actually the materialist who ‘denies’ his true ‘self’. Indeed, he buries it under a mountain of tawdry distractions and becomes little more than a sense-enslaved animal. Can we really say the glutton or the drunkard is being his highest ‘self’? No, the ‘self’ is barely in evidence at all! An inarticulate impostor has taken its place.

Religion is not about ‘depriving’ the senses of certain experiences. On the contrary, it is about REFINING the senses so that all experiences are felt to the fullest extent. Indian philosophy likens the 5 senses to 5 ‘horses’ leading the proverbial ‘chariot’ of the human body. Wild horses race to their own destruction, whereas those under firm control get to their destination quickly and efficiently. It’s rather like a garden full of weeds. The materialist reasons there is no point in digging them up because the resulting field will only be ‘plain’ anyway. What he doesn’t realize is that the barren soil is only temporary and will one day bear fruit if carefully cultivated! The immoral materialist simply chooses short-term distractions over a long-term harvest. The spiritual individual who reaps the latter is the truly ‘happy’ one.

Since the dawn of time, man has struggled to ascertain what is in his best interests. Plato’s “Euthyphro Dilemma” famously asked whether God commands what is ‘good’ or whether something BECOMES ‘good’ by virtue of God commanding it? Firstly, it’s

important to acknowledge that ‘good’ is a term we arbitrarily apply to anything that seems to serve our best interests. As Neale Donald Walsch muses, “There’s no such thing as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ so much as what does or doesn’t WORK given what we want to achieve.” If we claim we want to go to Canada, it doesn’t ‘work’ if we head to Mexico. That’s not to say it’s morally reprehensible to go to Mexico! It simply doesn’t accord with what we claim we want to achieve.

Likewise, whenever we express a desire to live happier and more productive lives, religion tends to be the roadmap whereas materialism is its antithesis. The answer to Plato’s quandary, then, is that God ‘commands’ whatever is liable to enlighten us in any given scenario. Of course, the catch is that the playing field changes from era to era and from nation to nation. What is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong’ is constantly contorting itself to keep up with what we desire for ourselves at any given moment. We only have to observe how what is and isn’t socially acceptable has gradually changed over the years to see that this is so.

I used to associate the inspiration of God and the wisdom of his prophets with “the right answers”. I would vainly imagine that a Messiah would enter the fray in places like Palestine and say the ‘right’ things in the ‘right’ way to the ‘right’ people at the ‘right’ time. Now I’m of the opinion that that will never happen because there are no ‘right’ answers! And even if there were, there would be no right WAY to make people embrace them. We’ve already seen that in the way previous prophets have divided opinion. But this is not the depressing thought it first appears to be. On the contrary, the beauty of it is that ANY conceivable solution is worth exploring! Far from being set in stone, life is revealed to be the fluid process it was always meant to be.

Every course of action has its inevitable pros and cons that we're free to explore as we determine WHO WE ARE. When we decide we're more than just animals we begin to act like it, and that's what passes for 'morality'...

16. THE DARK SIDE

“Hysteria is a disintegration of the personality, and it unleashes tremendous energies with a power for destruction as fatal as those of the split atom.”

- *Alexander Elchaninov*

Atheists can question the moral achievements of religion so brazenly because it often seems that religious fanatics are the most immoral of all. Whether they're assassinating a doctor who performs abortions or flying a plane into a building that kills thousands, a misguided belief in God allows people to commit the worst atrocities imaginable with cold-blooded impunity. And this is to say nothing of the numerous wars that have supposedly been fought in the name of religion!

Of course, secular regimes have also dealt out their fair share of death – believing as they do that men are little more than animals that can be disposed of arbitrarily. But apologists like Richard Dawkins make the point that atheists seldom commit atrocities “in the name of atheism” (no matter how much that belief system fuels their egotism). As Steven Weinburg put it, “We’ll always have good people doing good things and bad people doing bad things, but it takes religion to make good people do bad things.” This is a seductive quote, but it’s not entirely accurate. We could just as easily flip it on its head to argue that it “takes religion to make BAD people do GOOD things”! But more importantly, it’s debatable as to whether ‘religion’ itself is what turns the ‘good’ individual ‘bad’.

Throughout this book I have accused the atheist of being “utterly incapable of distinguishing between sincere religion and its insincere

counterpart.” We must now explore that claim in greater detail. You don’t have to look far to find someone who ‘appears’ to be religious acting irrationally (if not downright immorally as we established at the outset). However, I would argue that they cease to qualify as ‘religious’ the minute they demonstrate such destructive behaviour! As the lesser known *Gospel Of Philip* laments, “There’s a difference between those who claim to be Christians and those who genuinely ARE.” A similar passage at *Revelation 2:9* intones, “People blaspheme when they say they are Jews when they are not.” Spiritually advanced individuals see a marked difference between themselves and those who half-heartedly follow in their footsteps.

In my previous book, *Sportuality*, I likened it to a rotund thug who wears the shirt of his favourite team. He may resemble a professional player outwardly, but that doesn’t automatically qualify him to compete at the highest level! On the contrary, he is likely to flounder in the role and give his team a bad name – no matter how much he claims to ‘love’ it. In this manner, the excessively pious individual tarnishes the religious movement he claims to be enamoured with. As Oscar Wilde put it, “You destroy the thing you love.” Similarly, the Buddha likened religion to a ‘blade’ that is liable to cut us when “poorly grasped”.

This regrettable trend is so common that Islamic mystics even have a term for it, which is ‘mustas-wif’. Sincerely imitating a spiritual master is an honourable act known as ‘mustas-awwif’, whereas those that do so half-heartedly for personal gain are denounced as ‘mustas-wif’. Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad is said to have been mortified by the way his supposed followers were responding to his teachings. Anecdotes abound in which he criticizes people for missing the point

and hopes future generations will “understand better than those who hear me now.” Rather poignantly, *Hadith 1:85* sees him predicting that “killing will increase when religion is beset by ignorance.” At another juncture, he praises those who will be able to substantiate their beliefs on the “Day Of Judgment” and denounces those who cannot because they have “blindly followed others”. These concerns culminated in a dream whereby he saw people failing to wear a garment properly. When asked what it meant he remarked, “It is the religion.”

It’s important to explore these lesser known aspects of Islam, because at this point in time no other religion is more closely associated with war and terrorism. It’s an easy association to make because there can be no denying that Islam has its roots in war (no matter how justified). The Prophet Muhammad’s story is one of waging war against the barbaric pagan tribes he grew up around. However, there are plenty of redeeming features that elevate his actions above those of a bloodthirsty tyrant. For a start, the wars were fought with some reluctance and were very much a last resort after a peaceful campaign had failed to effect change. *Surah 2:217* of the *Qur’an* finds him concluding that “oppression is worse than slaughter” after carefully weighing up the situation.

Once war was on the table, it also began taking place under the strictest guidelines. The *Qur’an* is like the “Geneva Convention” 1’000 years in advance! It insists that war mustn’t be fuelled by hate, must end at the nearest possible opportunity, and that the defeated opponents must be treated humanely. Anything less is poetically said to “transgress all bounds”. Merciful injunctions of this kind were literally unheard of in the barbaric times that religious figures walked the earth.

They must be credited for steering things in a civilized direction instead of being criticized for inheriting the conventions of their time. Before Muhammad, both Moses and Jesus lamented the primitive minds they had to work with. There is always a serious drag factor to take into account whenever a visionary seeks to reform an established society.

Even so, the fallible example of Muhammad is thought to wilt in the light of Jesus' non-violent existence. Christ's story is one of rising above evil and defeating it indirectly instead of lowering ourselves to its level and meeting it head on. The violent solutions of Islam seem like a step backwards by comparison. This is a little unfair because Muhammad never claimed to be anything more than "an ordinary man to whom inspiration was given." Christ, on the other hand, claimed to be God incarnate and couldn't conceivably put a foot wrong! Indeed, their missions were very different. Like Moses, Muhammad was charged with leading a nation – whereas Jesus never had any such responsibility and could swan around as a force of nature in his own right. In that respect, Christianity could be said to be a 'superhuman' religion whereas Islam is very much a 'human' religion. The latter isn't necessarily 'inferior' because the average person is a fallible mortal who needs that leeway to begin making spiritual progress. Christianity is a lofty ideal to which many aspire but fall short of.

Indeed, just as many wars have been fought in the name of Christianity – which is a contradiction in terms because the movement is resolutely pacifist! The notion that Christians should fight was instigated by Emperor Constantine who embraced the religion in the 4th century but then realized it was making his empire weaker. At his behest, theologians scrambled to make it compatible with warfare and

the “Just War” theory came into play. Like the injunctions of the *Qur’an*, it civilizes the process of warfare and requests that it be fought with honourable intentions and proportionate force.

As admirable as this all sounds, it cannot be accurately described as ‘Christian’ and must once again be attributed to fallible mortals who drag religious ideals down to their level. This line of reasoning is what opened the door to the Crusades, which along with terrorism are synonymous with the dark side of religion. But again, I would argue that such exploits cease to be ‘religious’ when they blatantly defy the religion in question! If a man contradicts everything Christ stood for, can he honestly be described as a ‘Christian’? Or must we find a more appropriate term to describe him? *1st John 4:20* offers a pertinent suggestion when it says, “If a man claims to love God but hates his brother, he is a liar.”

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins argues that there’s no such thing as a “Muslim child” so much as “a child of Muslim parents”. If we must make that distinction then let us also distinguish between “religious people” and “people who appear to be religious”! Similarly, Dawkins often delights in recounting the hate mail he has received from so-called ‘Christians’ who wish death on him and taunt him about divine retribution. They are of course in error to do so, but we must also acknowledge that they cease to be ‘Christian’ the minute they spew such poisonous rhetoric. Unless we can envisage Jesus himself writing such a letter then they’re not worthy of the name! They are nothing more than insecure, impolite members of the public and should be dismissed as such.

The same is true of Islamic terrorists, who contravene hundreds of commandments in the *Qur'an* which explicitly forbid their actions – all the while citing one or two that ‘could’ vaguely endorse terrorism if taken out of context. Muslims aren’t allowed to wage war in anger, harm innocent bystanders (including the environment), and certainly cannot commit suicide. Terrorism falls down at every single hurdle. It’s the equivalent of reading *The Origin Of Species* and then raping a goat on account of the fact it mentions the reproductive habits of animals! Such a response is obviously tenuous and disproportionate. So too are the responses to some passages of scripture.

The most pertinent example is this lack of understanding is the Islamic concept of ‘Jihad’ itself, which has become synonymous with worldly warfare when it originally meant the exact opposite. At its best, ‘Jihad’ refers to the INNER struggle that takes place within every individual’s life. Upon returning home from a war, the Prophet Muhammad dismissed it as the “lesser Jihad” and remarked that it was now time for the “greater Jihad” of putting the situation into perspective. Sins like ‘anger’, ‘greed’, and ‘lust’ are held up as metaphorical enemies that must be conquered by the forces of virtue. This is an effective analogy that we also see in the Hindu scripture of *Mahabharata*.

It should be plain to see that all attempts to invoke religion are a convenient way of achieving a political aim. Indeed, a study by Robert Pape in the wake of 9/11 ascertained that as much as 95% of terrorism is motivated entirely by the desire to “repel an invading force from what is perceived to be the terrorist’s homeland.” We’re talking about territorial disputes rather than philosophical ones. After all, it’s not

scriptural quotes that they're firing at each other! Even wars between nations can lack any real conviction. This is plain to see in war-zones like Afghanistan, where mercenaries are happy to switch sides for as little as \$10 per day. They're responding to every impulse EXCEPT a religious one!

Cynics often hold up the "Holy Land" of Israel as the ultimate example of religion being inextricably linked to a territorial dispute. Again, the irony is that the Zionist state has very little to do with 'religion' per se and has its roots mainly in politics. Indeed, it sits awkwardly with many pious Jews who felt it was the role of the Messiah to re-establish their homeland. What we have now cannot be accurately described as 'religious' unless we hail the politicians involved as prophets of some kind! Even the most fervent Zionist would be reluctant to do that. Vocal critics at the time, like Hermann Cohen, warned that it would actually do more to compromise Jewish ideals of justice than to support them. This has been born out by the ill will that has followed.

The dispute in Israel also overlooks what is actually meant by "Holy Land". As I've hinted in preceding chapters, many spiritual thinkers simply see it as a metaphor for enlightenment. This is especially true of Moses' story, which had him liberating his people from the 'bondage' of a materialistic Egyptian empire. Indeed, the Hebrews rendered Egypt it as 'Mitzrayim' – which translates as "narrow place". The founding father of Judaism, Abraham, has an equally spiritual story. He didn't procure the land of Canaan by force, as we now tend to assume. On the contrary, his Godliness recommended him to the existing inhabitants who he successfully

integrated with. The true definition of a “Holy Land” is a land that is MADE holy by virtue of a spiritual contingent being there! This is what *Exodus 29:46* refers to when God assures his people he will “dwell amongst them” wherever they may be. True religion is never about the material alone so much as the power to enliven the material.

The civil wars that take place within each religion are another example of the perception not quite matching the reality. We encounter different factions squabbling and then roll our eyes as though religion were entirely responsible. We see Catholics locking horns with Protestants, Sunni Muslims trading blows with Shi’ites, and even peaceful Buddhists distinguish between the original ‘Theravada’ tradition and the bastardized ‘Mahayana’ version. Again, the irony is that such disputes offend against the original teachings of each religion in question. One of the opening sentiments in St Paul’s letter to the *Corinthians* reads, “I urge you not to have factions among yourselves.” The minute somebody contradicts the numerous injunctions of this kind, we must reconsider whether they can be labelled ‘religious’.

In most cases, they are of course simply inheriting some sort of tribal allegiance. It’s almost irrelevant which banner they rally behind. The way people are willing to get equally worked up over a game of football tells us all we need to know about that! Atheists like to think that tension would cease to exist if there was no religion, but the truth is that it would simply manifest itself in a different way. It’s more about human insecurity (or insanity) than religious belief. Indeed, very few people genuinely understand the difference between one religious sect and another. Even the individuals involved may struggle to justify their stance!

As far as scripture is concerned, dozens upon dozens of verses in the *New Testament* render it impossible to live this kind of violent existence under Christ's regime. Indeed, the opportunity arose again and again while he was living. Upon being arrested, his disciples are stirred into fending off his captors but he calls them off – insisting that he could call on “a thousand legions of angels” to destroy his opponents if that would solve anything. The point is that it wouldn't and that it therefore isn't necessary. He goes on to acknowledge that his kingdom is “not of this world” – and doesn't need to be fought over as if it was. Rather presciently, he predicted his followers would find this idea hard to accept. *John 16:2* sees him lamenting, “There will come a time when people who kill will think they're doing God's work.” But he also offered guidance on how we might identify his true disciples, imploring them to “love one another as I have loved you.” Any behaviour that falls short of this ideal is a manmade religion, designed to serve a very different agenda.

Jesus' resistance to evil may not have manifested itself in reckless violence, but that doesn't mean the resistance wasn't there. A famous episode sees him turning over stalls in the temple and chasing the traders out when he perceives them to be abusing it. He also wasn't shy about confronting people intellectually. It's a myth that ‘pacifism’ involves standing back and allowing society to self-destruct. As Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King went on to demonstrate, it's about “courageously confronting hate with its opposite – love.” That is the defining ingredient. It doesn't matter what a spiritual individual finds himself doing so long as his actions are sponsored by ‘love’ and rational thinking – even if it involves waging war. It is for this reason

that Jesus implored us to “love our enemies”. This offends the sensibilities of most people who associate ‘love’ and ‘forgiveness’ with letting someone get away with murder. On the contrary, there is such a thing as TOUGH love and intervening with good intentions is often the best thing you can do.

Regardless of how we explain extremism away, critics of religion insist that the world would be a better place if it didn’t exist at all and there was no text to be misinterpreted in the first place. As seductive as that assumption is, I find it a rather depressing and cowardly stance to take. Must we really stand still and be reduced to silence lest our actions have unforeseen consequences?! That wouldn’t be ‘living’ at all. It would be the opposite of life – death. Atheists call for the death of the spirit in an effort to protect the body, but they inadvertently end up killing both because the latter is dependent on the former.

It must always be possible to live an extraordinary life, as our prophets have done. And inherently, it must also be possible to respond to that life in the wrong way. Ironically, that’s the only way responding in the RIGHT way becomes a clear option! We cannot risk making things even worse by not responding to religion at all. As Michael Poole rightly observes, “The antidote to abuse is not disuse but responsible use.” If somebody hits you over the head with a frying pan, it’s not accurate to say that the frying pan is at fault and its only purpose is to do harm. It’s more accurate to say that it has simply been abused for a purpose that was never intended. Likewise, fanaticism isn’t an argument against God existing – nor is it even an argument against religion having value. On the contrary, it’s a cry help that demands we understand religion all the more thoroughly...

17. RED IN TOOTH AND CLAW

“We suffer from evils which we inflict upon ourselves,
but then ascribe them to God who is far from connected with them.”

- *Moses Maimonides*

Further to the way religious people behave, the way the planet behaves can also rattle our faith in religion. As far as the average person is concerned, the single most popular argument against a belief in God is that the world isn't actually that nice a place. Even the most open-minded religious believer can often be found wondering why “bad things happen to good people.” This very question has merited its own field of study known as ‘theodicy’. Assuming he even exists at all, many philosophers have argued that God either CANNOT address evil (in which case he is not all-powerful) or WILL NOT do it (in which case he is not ‘good’). Religious believers are left having to justify that God exists and is both powerful and good – for nothing less would be worthy of worship. It's what the secular thinker JL Mackie referred to as an “inconsistent triad” that betrays the folly of God's existence.

In order to answer this charge, we first have to establish what we actually mean by ‘good’ and ‘bad’. It turns out that a “bad thing” is anything that compromises the happiness and physical welfare of a human being, whereas a “good thing” is something that safeguards all of the above. This is actually a very childish and egotistical way of viewing the world if you think about it! Nothing remotely bad is ever allowed to happen to anybody for any reason? How would such a universe even function? The answer is it wouldn't.

As we've established in previous chapters, a push and pull between positive and negative influences is needed for anything to mean anything. By its very definition, a human being cannot dwell in a physical world of relativity without taking a few knocks and bumps. Perfection is where the soul comes FROM – not what it comes here FOR! Instead of wrapping the outside world in cotton wool, we must wrap ourselves in armour. If nothing else, we need a kind of spiritual and mental 'armour' that removes the childish assumption that life should be perfect. Nothing has any meaning save the meaning we GIVE it. As Shakespeare famously put it, "Nothing is good or bad lest thinking make it so." Rain isn't 'bad' unless it's your agenda to avoid getting wet. It's perfectly 'good' if your aim is to grow something in the garden!

The irony is that religion never asked us to believe any different. No religion ever promised that physical life would be some sort of playground of perpetual happiness. After all, that's what 'Heaven' is supposed to be. It's ironic that atheists don't believe in a heaven above and yet they believe it should exist here on earth?! It's symptomatic of the fact that they give undue credence to the material world. Religious figures, on the other hand, reverse conventional ideas of prosperity and extol the virtues of stoicism. They teach us that challenges are there to be overcome – not swept away by an interfering deity. Krishna was born in a prison, but OVERCAME that indignity to rule his own kingdom. Joseph was sold into slavery, but OVERCAME that plight to become the benevolent Governor of Egypt. Jesus suffered the most horrific death humanity could muster, but OVERCAME that hostility to live on in the hearts and minds of his followers. As for the Prophet

Muhammad, his mind was torn apart by searing headaches – but he made sure to recite the profound words that accompanied them.

In each instance, “bad things” aren’t something to be avoided so much as turned around. Those that succeed in doing so are the truly “good people”. As St Paul intimates at *Romans 5:3*, “We glory in tribulation knowing that it tests our character.” We also see this sentiment in *Surah 3:140* of the *Qur’an*, which likens our tumultuous lives to “gold being assayed in a furnace.” A teacher of mine once used the charming analogy of two caterpillars at the bottom of a garden. One of them struggled out of its casing as nature intended and flew away as a colourful butterfly. The other had made no such progress, so my teacher gently cut it open to help the process along. To his utter astonishment, this butterfly emerged black and white! Without the struggle, no blood had gotten to the wings and they remained without colour. It all goes to show that struggle can be essential to a worthwhile existence.

The simple fact is that we can’t trust our own judgment. What we perceive to ‘bad’ for us may not be bad at all, whereas what we assume is ‘good’ could turn out to be anything but. Our lives are littered with instances where things “turned out for the best”. If we had our own way, our lives would be a meaningless mess where nothing remotely stimulating ever happens. This is one of the reasons that religious people bristle at the idea of abandoning children simply because they may be ‘deficient’ in some way. The religious individual sees it as a character building opportunity for all concerned and rejects the assumption that life has to be perfect to have value. They credit themselves with being able to endow something with a value that may

not be in evidence. They seize control of life and bend it to their will instead of being at its mercy.

It's odd when people criticize religion for avoiding these awkward questions because it's positively devoted to confronting them head on! It's symptomatic of an inadequate understanding of what religion is and who God is meant to be. The reason the atheist fails to find God is invariably because they don't know what they're looking for in the first place. Their failure to find is commensurate with their inability to look. The bizarre reasoning that follows is often self-defeating. We've already seen how atheists disbelieve in the heaven above yet believe in heaven on earth. We also encountered a similar contradiction in the chapter about morality, whereby atheists criticize religious people for needing to be 'policed' from on high in order to be good. This is an argument favoured by Richard Dawkins and co. The irony is that they then lament the harshness of earthly life and conclude that God doesn't exist precisely because the world ISN'T policed! The squirming atheist wants it both ways and is never pleased with any answer. As we've already established, this is largely because they're not interested in deducing the truth and would much rather score intellectual points.

Understood properly, religion invites us to consider that there's more to life than meets the eye and that we should look beyond our own petty requirements. We can't ask God (or the soul) to share our peculiar fascination with living forever in the physical form, free from harm. If anything, God is a NON-physical entity that would have far less regard for the material world than we do! The message of religion is that we must transcend the physical and put it in perspective – not cling to it as if it were all there is. As the front cover of this book

implies, we are like birds that have become so accustomed to our cage that we refuse to leave – even when the door is open to us and we are promised a freer existence outside.

The most poignant proponent of this brand of scepticism was Charles Darwin, whose already vulnerable faith was all but obliterated by the untimely death of his daughter, Annie. In situations such as these, people fail to see the value of God. He either doesn't exist or doesn't care enough to prevent such things. Either way, he is no longer worthy of worship. But this is quite peculiar reasoning when you think about it. Firstly, it assumes that God is "picking people off" one by one like a sniper! I suspect we have rather more responsibility for our own lives and that God's involvement in matters of life and death is minimal. If we smoke all our lives, is it accurate to say that God "gave us" lung cancer? Or is it more accurate to say that lung cancer is an inevitable by-product of abusing the system that God presides over? As we saw in our exploration of hell, God is best perceived as a fire that only ever burns us when we abuse it – and even then it only does so unwittingly. As the *Qur'an* repeatedly points out, "It was you who wronged your own souls."

It's easy to see how those with vices invite their own death, but what of innocent little children? The same applies in cases both big and small. Life is an uncompromising system that churns out what we feed in – whether knowingly or unknowingly. There are many reasons that death and disease are visited upon us – most of them perfectly natural and of our own making. Who knows to what extent the way we conduct ourselves might upset the delicate balance of life? In the case of children, the responsibility does not lie with them personally so much

as their parents and society as a whole. Our way of life may expose ourselves and others to harmful influences that simply must kill us! To stop it would almost be as negligent as doing it in the first place.

This brings us to the heart of the matter. Charles Darwin of all people should have known that death is an essential part of life. His theory of natural selection required that organisms live and die in quick succession so as to evolve onwards. Looking at it objectively, it would be hypocritical for him to lament the death of his daughter. Members of other species are allowed to die but we aren't? Human beings are supposed to live forever? If that were so then we wouldn't have the joy of procreating in the first place! Or if we did, there would be tens of billions of humans fighting for survival on one small planet like parasites. We would have simply traded the misery of death for the misery of a dire existence.

It's in our nature to cling to life – especially those of others that we love – but there can be no doubt that it is an irrational stance to take. The fallible human shakes his fist at God and claims to know better when he blatantly doesn't. This is the folly of all anti-religious sentiments – Charles Darwin included. The death of his daughter might very well represent the 'death' of something even more valuable – his common sense! Such people often claim to have "lost their faith", but it's more accurate to say that they never had it in the first place. A faith that can be shaken by death or misfortune was only ever a 'faith' in the physical, fuelled by naïve self-interest. True religion is beyond such petty concerns.

The famous zoologist, David Attenborough, puts forth a similar argument against God based on his observations of the natural world.

Like many people, he cannot reconcile the dark side of nature with its supposed beauty in other respects. He cites the example of “a worm boring into a child’s eyeball,” and offers it up as proof that a deity cannot possibly preside over creation. As ever, this is a very egocentric appraisal of the situation which assumes that God’s existence is commensurate with nothing bad ever happening to humans?! The worm boring into the eyeball in question might very well think that life is panning out nicely. We only disagree for selfish, ignorant reasons. Indeed, our lives are moulded into shape by parasites of a less noticeable kind. If we could zoom in on our anatomy, we would discover that it’s swimming with malevolent life forms of one kind or another! We’re quite happy for them to work their magic so long as we’re not aware of them. Ironically, David Attenborough himself is happy to do this in his wildlife documentaries – stepping back and “allowing nature to take its course” whenever something sinister happens. The reason he doesn’t intervene is the same reason that God doesn’t.

Nonetheless, it is irrational thinking of this kind that inspired the poet Alfred Tennyson to famously denounce nature as “red in tooth and claw.” The implication being that if there is a God, he presides over a merciless theatre of death. In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins riffs on this by exploring the savage process of a lion hunting its prey. He rhetorically asks, “Whose side is God on?” Is it God’s will that the lion kills or is it God’s will that the prey escapes? The answer is, of course, that God has no vested interest in either outcome and is beyond it all. God is both the lion AND its prey! She is the push AND the pull, each working against the other to weave a meaningful tapestry. God’s ‘will’

is that life as a whole evolves in an interesting way – not that one particular life form survives and prospers for a few years.

Of course, secular people aren't alone in their regard for life on this planet. A belief that the world was created carries with it an inherent belief that the creation warrants the utmost respect. This is particularly true of mankind, which has evolved to an especially high level whereby we can contemplate the meaning of life and begin to exert control over it. In the religious view, this also means humans are uniquely capable of having a meaningful relationship with their creator. However, the religious regard for life differs from that of secular people in that they don't assume this impressive life form must live forever. Indeed, a remarkable life might very well involve dying as Christ's example demonstrated! This is what caused him to remark, "He who values his life will lose it." Religious people value spiritual life over physical life, and merely see the latter as a means of expressing the former.

Of course, when people talk about the existence of suffering they're really talking about the BIG things. They can accept losing their car keys and put up with the odd shower of rain – it's the millions that perish in wars or starve in Third World countries that really concerns us. Again, the same logic applies to cases both big and small. It's neither practical nor beneficial to have God intervene in human affairs on a regular basis. In fact, to do so could be considered an act of evil! Millions starve in Africa because of corrupt leadership, irresponsible living, and a lack of compassion on our part. If God were to miraculously clean up that mess, none of the above issues would be addressed. They would practically be rewarded! The message would be

that it's fine to be corrupt and heartless. God's involvement would be a quick fix that solves nothing, whereas the solutions we arrive at ourselves would be real and lasting. When we finally do solve world hunger, it will be because we genuinely want to. Humanity will have been inspired to show itself at its best. Perhaps that's where God can be found in all of this – inspiring us to do things for ourselves like any loving parent would. Indeed, one of the most famous passages of the *Qur'an* reminds us that “God helps those who help themselves.”

At this juncture, you might recall the miracles of Jesus and wonder why he fed thousands of people if it's so irresponsible to do so. The answer is that the two situations simply aren't comparable. There's a difference between feeding a few faithful disciples as a one-off gesture and propping up an entire nation on a daily basis! The latter makes a mockery of the entire political and economic landscape. Jesus didn't feed and heal every human being in Israel each day of his 33 years on this earth. Chaos would have ensued if he did! His miracles (assuming they occurred at all) were carefully calculated symbolic gestures.

The earth and the creatures upon it are really ONE living organism. Like any organism, discomfort is felt when something is wrong and we are moved to address it. When we're hungry, discomfort emanates from the stomach and we are encouraged to do something about it. Likewise, when MILLIONS of people are hungry, discomfort visits the minds of us all and we are inspired to take action on a grander scale. Sinister facts of life aren't there to be swept under the carpet – they're warning signs that we must pay the utmost attention to.

We also see this in natural disasters, as the earth becomes restless under the pressure of keeping things ticking over. God regularly takes

the blame for such events (they're even legally defined as "Acts of God"!), but once again it's only our response to them that makes them 'bad'. Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions come with the territory – as do floods and tsunamis if we want to live on a planet that has water. Our selfish complaints about such things can once again be traced back to our penchant for living forever. No good can come of such an irrational desire. Instead, we must learn from such events and adapt our behaviour accordingly (as we are beginning to do with our response to climate change).

The world is a self-regulating system that is perfectly capable of sorting itself out – just not necessarily in our favour! Even within human history, it's clear to see that things reach a pivotal moment where they can no longer be tolerated and must change for the better. Our responses to slavery and the Holocaust are good examples of this. Even the most wretched episode in life brings us one step closer to a solution that forbids it ever happening again. In that sense, nobody lives nor dies in vain. Everything has a meaning if we choose to endow it with one.

As *Hosiah 2:6* intones, "I will hedge thy way with thorns and walls." These hypothetical 'walls' are not intended to frustrate us or harm us so much as show the way. When I lived in Manchester I enjoyed going to a certain park, but I had to walk through one of the roughest streets in the neighbourhood to get there. So too does humanity have to walk down some dark corridors on its way to a beautiful destination. This is the sentiment that *Psalms 23* seeks to leave us with those immortal lines, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for thou art with me."

18. FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

“A believer is surely a lover.
Yea, of all the lovers the most in love!”

- *Soren Kirkegaard*

Part of me quite likes the fact that nobody believes in God anymore. Like the only heterosexual in a world full of homosexuals, I vainly imagine that I have the object of my desire to myself! At this dark moment in history, I like to think that the flame of my devotion is all the more attractive and noticeable. But part of me also knows that this simply isn't the case. As I've gone to great lengths to establish, God is not some tangible entity whose attention has to be fought for. She is effortlessly aware of every development in every corner of the universe. As Jesus and Muhammad are united in saying, “Not so much as a leaf falls to the ground without God's knowledge.”

As we've established, the reason this must be so is that God is everything and everything is God. The intelligence that lurks behind the material world feels every sensation within it as surely as our nervous system covers every inch of our anatomy. But God isn't merely the sum total of all that is material. We are also asked to consider that she's responsible for every emotion that enlivens the material. “God is love,” as the cliché goes. But statements tend to reach the status of a ‘cliché’ when they're self-evidently true. I suspect there's a lot of truth to the idea that God is best understood as the grandest emotion that two entities can share. It is, after all, what binds them together and sponsors their most honourable actions.

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins playfully argues that religion is little more than a ‘by-product’ of human love. There are, after all, a lot of similarities. The pious individual loves God or a particular prophet with a blind devotion that mirrors the way we put a beloved human on a pedestal. Our affection for such people is indeed quite irrational if you think about it, because there’s no logical reason why we would behold them to be so much ‘better’ than anybody else. Cynics would argue that it’s simply a ‘trap’ we have fallen into so as to procreate effectively and safeguard the future of the species.

It’s strange how empiricists are so very quick to discredit God on scientific grounds, but neglect to apply the same level of scrutiny to the mystery of love! One can scarcely imagine a scientist returning home to his wife with a Valentine’s card that reads, “I’m sufficiently drawn to you so as to procreate effectively.” Nor can we imagine him demanding ‘proof’ when his child looks up and utters, “I love you.” The ease with which we believe something is commensurate with our desire to believe that it is so. It just so happens that the egotistical atheist has cultivated a scenario in which it pleases him to think God doesn’t exist. More favourable concepts, such as love and self-aggrandisement, meet with his approval.

Evidently, it’s not always appropriate to analyze things scientifically. Ironically, though, religion does favour such a cynical view of human love – lest our desire for the physical keeps us from the spiritual. It’s what King Solomon denounced as “vexation of spirit” in his masterful poetry. Religions are primarily concerned with transcending the physical and putting it in perspective. They tend to be wary of any manifestation of human love that might compromise this

ideal. The ultimate example of this is of course the story of Adam & Eve, which sees a man and a woman being tricked out of their divine inheritance by succumbing to base desires. It's clearly a metaphor for how early man became excessively sensual and materialistic – looking outside of himself for happiness and never quite finding it again.

One of the most misunderstood lines from this episode is *Genesis 3:16* where God tells Eve, “Thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee.” The misogynistic people of the time took this to mean that women were meant to be “ruled over” by men. The profound truth is that ‘he’ doesn’t refer to “thy husband” – it refers to DESIRE! Throughout the *Bible*, ‘desire’ is personified as a formidable entity that ‘rules’ us if we don’t rule it. It all harks back to the religious ideal of putting irrational desires into perspective and asserting control of life instead of being at its mercy.

The religious argument has always been against mindless ‘lust’ rather than ‘love’ in its purest form. The spiritual aspirant is acutely aware that an impulse as powerful as sex has the potential to destroy all their hard work. It’s plain to see that casual sex lacks emotion and decorum, and must be denounced as an abuse of the human form. This is the crux of the argument against homosexuality. It is thought to be synonymous with lust, which betrays an irrational and self-destructive lifestyle. Indeed, the words of St Paul that caution against it at *Romans 1:27* read, “Men should not turn to each other in LUST.” Lust is the operative word here. Both heterosexuals and homosexuals alike are implored to beware its destructive power.

Rather predictably, homosexuals are often quick to denounce religion as false because it’s perceived to be in their interests to do so.

The irony is that homosexuality isn't that big a deal for most religions. Christianity, in particular, has a reputation for opposing it most vehemently – and yet Christ himself never uttered one word on the subject! If anything, it seems clear he would have stood up for the oppressed and persecuted of any persuasion – as evinced by his defence of the woman caught in adultery. That's not to say he endorses the actions of those he defends, but it's obviously an argument against persecuting such people.

The Christian argument against homosexuality can be traced back to the personal opinions of St Paul. And as we've seen, even those were against lust in general – calling both heterosexuals and homosexuals to account. We have to go all the way back to the books of Moses for the only other explicit reference to homosexuality. *Leviticus 18:22* famously declares that “man should not lie down with man,” before denouncing it as an ‘abomination’. Even this isn't as damning as it first appears. It's very fashionable for us to embrace homosexuality nowadays, when the world is more over-populated than under-populated and our survival as a species is assured. At the time Jews were ruling against it in 1250BC, their community was beleaguered after escaping slavery in Egypt and traipsing through the desert for 40 years. Procreation within a family environment was no “lifestyle choice” – it was of the utmost importance if they were to survive and prosper. The sentiment against homosexuality at this time might best be described as it not being ‘desirable’ or ‘helpful’. Now that the planet is over-populated to the tune of 6 billion people, it might very well be the other way around! Homosexuality could be seen as a natural way of curbing birth rates.

That's not to say that the family is any less sacrosanct now and that its downfall should be celebrated. Questions must always be asked of any community, lest they find themselves beyond criticism and free to indulge the very same bigotry they accuse others of. But what is clear is that circumstances have changed considerably over the past 3'000 years, and a fierce resistance to gay relationships is harder to justify. Quite frankly, we've got a long way to go before we can complain that there's TOO MUCH love in the world! If that's a problem then it's a nice one to have and the last one we should ever have to worry about addressing.

With all these unnecessary headaches surrounding the sex instinct, it's easy to see why some religious figures were keen to extricate themselves from it altogether. Jesus and many of his followers made a point of being celibate, as did Gandhi as recently as the 20th century. The Buddha also found the family life a distraction and belatedly rejected it once he had attained enlightenment. At the height of his disillusionment, he even saw fit to name his first child 'Rahula' – which translates as 'fetter'!

Being in a relationship is a kind of 'death' – the death of the individual, who must surrender his unique identity to adopt a shared identity. Although this sits well with most of us, it jars with driven individuals who are trying to achieve something extraordinary. In a mortal relationship, the spirit dies for the sake of the body whereas spiritual masters seek to kill the body for the sake of the spirit! Martin Scorsese's much-derided film, *The Last Temptation Of Christ*, captured this ideal perfectly in its closing scenes. Rather controversially, Christ fantasizes about living a normal life – but then begs to be martyred as

intended when he realizes how insignificant and unfulfilling that “normal life” would be.

Most worldly people find it hard to believe that a man can live without what they perceive to be life’s greatest pleasure. They have a vested interest in dragging spiritual giants like Jesus down to their level. It has become fashionable to claim that he really was a family man after Dan Brown’s scurrilous *Da Vinci Code* novel implied as much. This accusation is laughable on a number of levels. For a start, it would have been inconvenient for a wanderer who travelled constantly with no ties to anyone or anything. More importantly, it would have been irresponsible for him to welcome death so brazenly if he was leaving a widow and orphans behind. We’re talking about a man so committed to his cause that he disowned his own mother! He was hardly likely to start a family of his own.

Above all else, he simply wouldn’t have felt the irrational desire to procreate in the first place. Worldly people find this hard to believe, but spiritual masters really do reach a point where sex and other impulses are beneath them. They don’t feel the need to play with the body any more than you feel the need to play with the toys you had as a child! Sometimes we simply grow out of things – no matter how fun they were – and set our sights higher. As St Paul puts it at *1st Corinthians 13:11*, “I became a man and put away childish things.”

Of course, that’s not to say we should all become celibate. Society would obviously cease to function if that were the case! Christ’s ideal of a sexless life is only for an elite few who feel they can pull it off. Other religions, such as Judaism and Islam, are quite happy for people to live sexual lives within a loving environment. They tailor their

message to the average person and fear what would happen to their mental health if they suppressed a natural urge without the spiritual mastery to back it up.

Indeed, self-proclaimed priests and monks often come unstuck when they try to shoehorn spiritual ideals into their worldly lives. The most sinister example of this is when celibate Catholic priests find themselves becoming inappropriately sexual with young members of their congregations. Only in a few isolated incidents, of course, but the fact that it can happen so much as once means that something isn't right. People are laying claim to a spiritual stature that they clearly do not possess. A spiritual man's celibacy is supposed to flow naturally from the conviction that there are greater pleasures than those of the senses, and a greater affection than that of humans. He shouldn't need to 'suppress' the desire to have sex – the desire shouldn't be there in the first place. As long as such desires are there, the individual must concede that he is still worldly and falls short of spiritual mastery. It's not sex they should 'refrain' from – it's the priesthood!

Nonetheless, there are instances when people of all kinds would do well to embrace abstinence from time to time. Like fasting, it's an extraordinary act of discipline that puts the physical world in perspective and allows even greater pleasures to shine through. People often assume religion is about 'self-denial', but it's more about self FULFILMENT! Those who are enslaved by their senses and irrational impulses are the ones that have really denied their selves. After all, you can't be your true 'self' until you have control of your 'self'. It is for this reason that the *Qur'an* poetically describes lust as being "seduced from thy true self."

This was the thinking behind Pope Benedict's controversial decision not to endorse contraception in Africa – along with the bold claim that condoms would actually INCREASE sexually transmitted diseases. Critics howled with derision, drowning out the point he was trying to make. He wasn't arguing that sexual activity should continue unabated without contraception – he was arguing that the sexual activity itself should be targeted as a root cause! His logic was that contraception only encourages more sexual activity and prevents people from developing a better relationship with the sex instinct. It was a call for disciplined self-control and a condemnation of lust. Critics of religion are utterly incapable seeing the world through a prism of purity and must always bring things down to their level.

This is also the argument against abortion, which has become an unsavoury form of contraception (the one use it was never intended for). Those that are 'pro-choice' claim that the woman must be free to do as she pleases. The irony is that religious people are 'pro-choice' too – arguing that the woman should have CHOSEN not to have sex outside of a stable relationship! The way liberals talk about pregnancy, you would think it happens by accident. Evidently, our scientific understanding of the process is lacking.

As with contraception, the religious argument against abortion isn't that we should maintain this high rate of pregnancy and gleefully deliver all the babies. The point is that we should aim to develop a better relationship with the sex instinct itself – controlling it like humans instead of being controlled BY it like animals. Future generations will look back in horror at the idea we killed babies in the womb for our own convenience. As the *Qur'an* warned 1'400 years

ago, “Do not kill your children for fear of want.” That “culture of death” will become known as the real ‘Holocaust’ of the 20th century.

It seems clear to me that human manifestations of ‘love’ are altogether uglier than what was intended by God. That selfless ideal of love is mutated by our egotistical self-interest and irrational self-destruction. In that sense, I think Richard Dawkins is wrong to posit that spiritual ardour is a by-product of human love. As with most secular arguments, it might just be the other way around. As the story of Adam & Eve suggests, perhaps divine love is the standard from which humanity has fallen. The lustful obsessions we have for each other might very well be an ugly mutation of spiritual love. In God’s absence, we look for love elsewhere and are betrayed by fallible mortal substitutes. Human love is indeed necessary to bind families together for the purpose of procreation. But so too is religion necessary to bind a soul to God for an equally fruitful relationship! As *1st John 4:19* puts it, “We love because he first loved us.”

EPILOGUE

“The fact that we have freedom OF religion
doesn’t mean we need freedom FROM religion.”

- *Bill Clinton*

I began this book in a pessimistic frame of mind, lamenting that religious people had become a persecuted minority in the west – and could expect to remain so for the foreseeable future. As I write these closing words, I can see that the wheels of militant atheism are already starting to fall off. It was only ever a rebellious protest against religion “of a certain kind” and those who were venting their frustrations seem to have finally got it out of their system. In fact, the pendulum has swung so far the other way that it’s actually desirable to know something about religion at a point in time when very few people do! In a world of egotism, being ‘different’ is key – and religion now stands to gain from a trend it once suffered at the hands of.

Even *The Guardian*, of all newspapers, has felt obliged to publish articles that reign in their beloved Richard Dawkins and cast doubt on his fallible logic. On the very same day, the front cover of a teaching journal features a chastened atheist conceding that religious education plays a vital role in a child’s upbringing. All the while, people in the street find themselves naturally gravitating towards places of worship and holy books as their materialistic way of life crumbles all around them.

I always knew that religion would once again be revealed to have value if it was subjected to a hot enough flame. As Neale Donald Walsch muses, “The nice thing about things falling apart is that you can

pick up the pieces you want.” The cynics may have smashed some of the traditions of religion, but they can never destroy it entirely. On the contrary, a chastened institution promises to grow back stronger like a pruned plant! All the critics have done is help to remove the dogmatic baggage that was burying true religion. The original teachings will shine through all the more clearly for it.

After all, atheism is nothing new. As far back as 500BC, ancient Greek and Roman philosophers had toyed with the idea that the world came into being by accident and no ‘Gods’ of any kind presided over it. Even those that did feign a belief in such things only did so half-heartedly and for their own ends. Religions have always had to do battle with a cynical contingent who give more credence to themselves than any deity. Indeed, that’s arguably the origin of every single one of them – from Abraham and Moses to Jesus and Muhammad. They were all Godly people in a Godless environment. But the other thing that unites them is that they were all proved right, and history looks back on them more favourably than their materialistic counterparts. As the *Qur’an* puts it, “Travel the world and see what became of those who rejected faith.”

No civilization can function for long without some sort of concept of God to put the human ego in its place. We vainly imagine it’s possible now because we’ve only been Godless for a few decades. If we were Godless for centuries on end, I imagine the results would be evermore horrendous. As we head into the 21st century, a lot of people playfully imply that something as ‘ancient’ as religion has no place in such an ‘advanced’ era. I believe they’re gravely mistaken, because we head into a 21st century fraught with self-inflicted problems of a

material nature – the solutions to which will be spiritual. It will involve modest living and selfless sharing – qualities that religion has always been positively devoted to cultivating. There was once a time when ethical living was an admirable “lifestyle choice”. As soaring populations find themselves devouring dwindling resources, piety might very well become a necessity for the first time. As Jesus famously predicted, “The meek shall inherit the earth.”

And yet true religion is always doomed to be a minority interest, dangling just outside the average person’s grasp. It demands two qualities from us – the ability to pursue it and the intelligence to know what we’re looking for in the first place. Very few people cultivate the latter, let alone the former. Like Noah toiling away on his Ark amidst mocking laughter, very few people have the wherewithal to break with convention and do what it takes to truly make life work. The masses are doomed to drown in the proverbial ‘deluge’ of their own materialism – blissfully unaware that it’s possible to ride such waves.

In the face of such relentless opposition, I’m often forced to ask myself why I continue to be so fascinated by religion. The answer I keep coming back to is that religion is self-improvement on a grand scale. It’s a blueprint to a life well lived. Indeed, the Indian definition of religion is “the art of eliminating the suffering caused by ignorance.” I was once asked what I ‘get’ out of religion. My abrupt answer was “Nothing”... and I meant it quite literally! I ‘get’ NOTHING out of religion. In other words, I dispense of the dubious assumption you need to “get something” in order for it to have value. That’s self-serving materialism at its most grotesque and any individual would do well to put it behind him. This is what religion challenges us and then

empowers us to do. By comparison, atheism hits the pause button and leaves us floundering in the shackles of egotism. For all its talk of 'evolution', it would rather like that glorious process to stop!

At least that's the way I inevitably see it. The sceptical philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche argued that moral reasoning only ever justifies the stance we hold already and is less interested in bringing about change than it claims. I suppose there's some truth to that. There's nothing anybody could say or do to convince me that God does not exist. I will always see it through a prism that dictates that God still exists regardless and that atheism is flawed in some way. Likewise, there's nothing I can say or do to convince a fervent atheist that God DOES exist. They too will always see life through a prism that dictates that religion is folly.

It's rather like when campaigners try to convince each other of their political views. It goes beyond 'right' or 'wrong' and no one course of action recommends itself. This is because it has more to do with how we see the world than what is absolutely true or absolutely false. You can't talk someone out of their political allegiance any more than you can convince them that their favourite colour is blue and not red! Discussion and debate can hang a little meat on the bones, but the skeleton itself is rather set in its ways.

It seems the same is true of attitudes to God and religion. Your psychological make-up has already reached the point where it either sees the value in such things or delights in rejecting them. But one thing I would like people to take from this book is that religious beliefs are nowhere near as laughable as cynics like to assume. Nor is an atheistic world view so foolproof as to lie beyond all criticism.

Comprehend the mystery of life however you wish, but let it come from a place of light-hearted love rather than venomous fear. Let the atheist and the religious believer be united in their passion for life on this planet. Disagreements about where it all came from needn't affect where it all ends...

FURTHER READING

“Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.”

- *Richard Steele*

If your interest was piqued by the issues raised in this book, you may like to consider looking up the following titles for more information. They were certainly instrumental in my own spiritual awakening and helped to shape this project:

***The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins**

The centrepiece of modern-day atheism is obviously a must-read – if only to illustrate the shortcomings of the movement. This is the work of a scientist straying far outside his comfort zone and it falters on a philosophical level. Nonetheless, it is seductively well written and the author has a contagious enthusiasm for science.

***The Case For God* by Karen Armstrong**

Intellectually speaking, this is a sound rebuttal to *The God Delusion* – illustrating how atheism only works as an argument against religion “of a certain kind”. However, Karen Armstrong’s writing lacks creativity and eloquence – resorting to lengthy chapters of verbose language. It may remain impenetrable to the average person, but the arguments within are worth understanding.

***User's Guide To Science And Belief* by Michael Poole**

A humble antidote to the venom of *The God Delusion* and co. If you've fallen for the popular misconception that religion is at odds with science, this will make you think again. It features a large variety of quotes from scientists who see no conflict with religious ideas.

***The Last Hours Of Ancient Sunlight* by Thom Hartmann**

A perceptive analysis of the environmental problems we face as we fall increasingly out of harmony with the planet we call home. Spiritual solutions are offered to material problems.

***Conversations With God* by Neale Donald Walsch**

The accolade of "life-changing bestseller" has never been more appropriate! Whether you take it as a hypothetical "conversation with God" or a genuine one, it's hard to dispute the witty wisdom that gushes forth from Neale Donald Walsch's pen. It's a little simplistic in hindsight, but there's no better introduction to spiritual thinking.

***Diary Of A Russian Priest* by Alexander Elchaninov**

The title may not promise much, but this is a surprisingly enjoyable collection of thoughts from a 19th century Russian priest. It's especially relevant because he had the unenviable task of remaining spiritual in a climate of militant atheism. The arguments he puts forth are a prime example of religious belief at its most thoughtful.

***My Experiments With The Truth* by Mohandas K. Gandhi**

The life of the Indian visionary as told in his own words. That's not necessarily a good thing, as the brief chapters lurch wildly from one topic to another – further hindered by a dubious grasp of the English language. However, his thoughts are worth understanding as he slowly evolves into a man of religious conviction.

***Autobiography Of A Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda**

Exactly what the title promises – the life story of a spiritual master as told by the man himself. Like the spiritual life itself, the verbose writing style of the Indian author takes a lot of getting used to but bears fruit once you do! A surprisingly witty and light-hearted exploration of what religion truly means.

***Man's Eternal Quest* by Paramahansa Yogananda**

A collection of lectures and essays from my favourite spiritual thinker. They come thick and fast in easy-to-read chunks, and yet manage to be deeply relevant every time. A gentle introduction to the man's work. Follow it up with yet more titbits from *The Divine Romance* and *The Journey To Self-Realization*.

***The Second Coming Of Christ* by Paramahansa Yogananda**

Not an estimate as to when Jesus will walk the earth again so much as an insight into what 'Christ' actually means. This is essentially the *New Testament* as interpreted by an Indian guru – and is all the better for it! If you've ever been tempted to accuse *The Bible* of not making sense, this will bring some much-needed clarity.

The King James Bible

If you're curious as to what's actually in *The Bible*, make sure it's this time-honoured version from the 17th century. The "olde" English of Tyndale might make it an uphill struggle, but it's infinitely more reliable than the modern translations that followed. It's more poetic too and captures the genius of the man at the centre of proceedings.

***Kabbalah For Dummies* by Arthur Kurzweil**

A charming insight into one of the world's oldest and most important religions, Judaism. All of the dogmatic misunderstandings are stripped away to reveal a faith that is deeply symbolic. It also dispels the myth that 'Kabbalah' is some sort of cult attended by vacuous celebrities!

***Muhammad: A Biography Of The Prophet* by Karen Armstrong**

A studious interpretation of the Prophet Muhammad's life for the benefit of western readers. Every common misconception is dealt with here in exhaustive detail. It will help you appreciate the difference between where Islam came from and where it is now.

***The Meaning Of The Holy Qur'an* by Abdullah Yusuf Ali**

A reliable translation of the *Qur'an* itself – complete with an insightful commentary from a knowledgeable Islamic scholar. Don't assume you know what a verse means until you've double-checked it here.

***The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran**

A poetic work of fiction from the Lebanese wordsmith, which reinterprets religious principles through the mouth of an anonymous ‘prophet’. It’s hard to disagree with a single sentiment that is uttered.

***Sportuality* by Mat Dickie**

My previous book about religion, which uses sporting metaphors to make spiritual principles easier to understand. It’s deliberately concise and light-hearted, and serves as a palatable introduction to the philosophies explored in this book.

