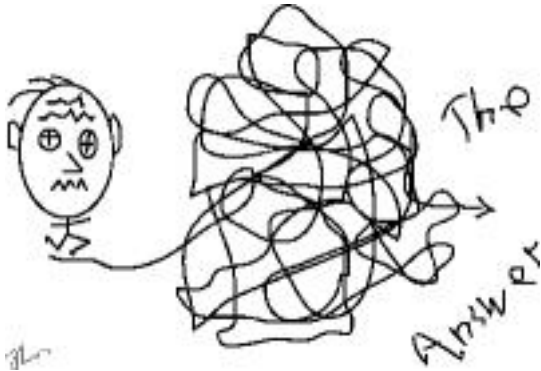


# The Agnostic's Survival Manual

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## Preface



Dear reader, are you really hoping for a book of 'ifs' and 'buts'? Do you want gentle ideas and a comfortable corner in which to rest your half-formed prejudices? Alas, you have come to the wrong place.

The truly employable in this world are harmless blobs of not-quite-anything, or heroic knights of flaming conviction (best employed by others after safe removal to a site of sacrifice), or good old fashioned hypocrites with opinions for hire. This particular writer is entirely unsafe to hire or to know, being addicted to a deadly combination of moderation and candour. Luckily few people ever understand what he is talking about.

Readers will quickly notice that this is not a "course", or even a coherent discourse. It is not especially well informed about the patient, though (it seems to me) often futile scholarship on religion which has consumed the lives of countless academic-type personalities for several thousand years. The Agnostic's Survival Manual is merely Thor May's survival manual in the supermarket of the spirits, a collection of observations and self-reminders which make sense to the author. Since the entries are *a-ha!* moments jotted down over the years, there is a degree of repetition, for the writer has sometimes been dim enough to think his sudden insight of the moment personally original, instead of recognizing last year's dinner reheated. In fact, there might be a noisy crowd in heaven when I finally get there, waiting to sue

for breach of copyright. Diligent hunters after nonsense are also sure to find plenty of inconsistencies. No problem, that's your call.

Since this material was first written in 1997 I have lived a couple of extra lives, notably in China and South Korea. Not surprisingly, some of my ideas have developed or been modified, although the general tone has not changed greatly. A small part of the content is more recent, and some of the old content has been slightly edited. The original title of this document was "The Atheist's Catechism" which was a bit too smug, and probably misrepresented the extremity of my attitudes to religion. In December 2014 I published a further speculation separately, with the title "[Does religion emerge as a product of complex systems? – exploring an allegory](#)". A title like that will surely destine it to a small readership, and I'd be fired from any copywriting agency, but the concept it deals with, a kind of cognitive "god-space" in the systems of mind, does seem credible to me.

There is no attempt or intention here to seek converts to a cause. I am perfectly happy if the reader has quite opposing views. From a shockingly brief career as a law student, I still recall the first words of the reigning professor's lecture: "You will forget most of what you come across in this place, but if you learn just one thing, learn to agree to disagree. Then you will have become a civilized man." That sounded pretty good to me at the time. It takes all kinds of people to make the world go around. Use this text as a striking iron for your own concepts, pro and contra. Enjoy.

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## **1. Introduction**

Light is such a funny thing. I wish to fix it with words like *white* or *blue*, which have a different flavour on the skin from *red* or *gold*. But when I come to the sense of street lights on my eyeball at a chilly 5.30am, just before night begins to get all wispy grey, nothing seems certain anymore. The dawn can turn into anything, I feel. It is better to shut my mouth for a while, stop being a poet, and wait to see if I really need an umbrella.

This is a foolish discourse, written under street lights in the lonely alleys of pre-dawn imagination. Or often when the day was done, fled without reason before we were really introduced. Yes, it is these lost chances that the words are cast for, like a net to catch moments that once had colour. A game no doubt, a hopeless bouquet brought in pretense that there was something I should have loved. I don't know about you, but I have to write. Writing is my surrogate for understanding the world. Each day is such a desperately short affair. Briefly you awake, eat, stretch and it is done, with all your plans undone. I have to imitate it with words, finger-written in the air, claiming to be me. *Me*, a daisy chain of letters scratched in time. Pathetic, but there you are.

*What does it all mean?* I wail. Why the hell should I care anyway? What is the point of understanding the weather cycle? With the brain of an earthworm wet and dry earth might be the cusp of universal truths. The soaring soul of an avatar must see so far above our horizons of profundity that my solemn words can only yield laughter and pity. Why should such a middle-minded creature as I toy with the common-sense of gods? *No choice, fool*, the

echoes cry. Did you ever try not to talk, even for five minutes? No, not with your meaty tongue. In the electron corridors of your brain. Do it now, be mocked. Hear the whispers unpick the gate-locks of your silent centre, watch with inner despair as delinquent memories make a riotous party of your rest.

I am the condemned host of eternal soliloquies, streaming in from the dark factories of chemical glands, messages from distant fingertips, drumbeats of pain on my retinas. Somehow from that chaos an attractor emerges, ghostly, now here, now gone, calls itself *I*, grabs for a hint of order, desperate to find its own continuity in the torrent of sensation, calls each fleeting pattern *meaning*. Craves meaning, craves life. That's what it's all about, idiot. The *I* thing can only live on *meaning*. Let the avatars laugh. What can I do about it? Nothing. Have to talk, have to write. So let's get on with it.

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## **2. Reader Beware!**

This is a partisan thesis, a catalogue of praise and condemnation masquerading as personal truth. Or perhaps it is a quest for personal certainty which keeps falling into quicksand. More likely, the quicksand, the contradictions are necessary parts of a journey. I fear not for myself, but for the occasional reader who in a careless moment may embed some part of my fleeting observation in his own personal notion of universal truths. Therefore, some honest admissions are in order.

When I was made, Faith was left out of the recipe. I lack any stolid certainty that the sun will rise tomorrow. I step from ice floe to ice floe, half expecting the next one to turn turtle and leave me drowning in a frozen sea. There is no expectation of miraculous rescue, no prayer for a silken cord from some propitiated helicopter god. The idea of worshipping anyone or anything nauseates me. Choral hymns, national anthems and cheering crowds make my gorge rise.

Why am I skeptical of everyone and everything? I don't know if there is a gene for doubt. From the nurture angle, I guess the shaping dynamic is that nobody has ever seriously believed in me, so the starting point must be self-doubt. The best my parents could manage was that kind of hope you hold out for winning the lottery, but barely concealed was a deeper message. They invested in me the same kind of despair that they had in themselves.

The upshot of all this corrosive doubt is that if anyone shows even a nascent tendency to trust my capacity, I immediately doubt either their veracity or their judgement. Not that the situation arises often. How I have hungered sometimes for one good friend.

Now you in your warm and welcoming world have many friends. Treasure them, keep your beliefs intact with your feast days and little rituals. My tale is from the borderlands where few travel and the faces are unfamiliar. Read it in front of a warm fire on a winter's evening, and count your blessings.

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### **3. The Passionate Skeptic**

I don't care what you believe in, so long as you don't believe in it too strongly. A belief is a weapon in the armoury of your heart, and its razor edge will murder the innocent. The ice, the fire of your passion will seduce mundane men and women. Your clarity will excite respect. And the first demagogue who comes along with a key to your heart's armoury will wrest the weapon from your moral grasp. The first cause which wears the colours of your belief will enlist you as a soldier in ravaging crusades. Peace friend. Keep your passion to doubt with. Our civilization is a simple matter of live and let live, of giving dreams a go, but stepping back with a wry smile when we get it wrong. Let the fundamentalists perish in their own pillars of fire. Spare a dollar for the living, and have a nice day. Doubt well, do what you can, then let it be. Presidents, priests, wage slaves, hustlers, men and women, kids, we all live by the grace of those we love to despise...

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### **4. Short Snips on Religion**

Thor has kept a collection of his blinding insights at a place called *Thor's Short Cuts* (<http://thormay.net/unwiseideas/aphorism.html>), and some of the more recent ones also on a blog of the same name (<http://thorshortcuts.byeways.net/>). Altogether these fragments stretch back to 1988. Before that he just cursed under his breath and chewed his fingernails. The whole selection surely says more about the messed up inside of Thor's head than anything definitive about the mad outer world of men and women. Nevertheless, from time to time his dystopian gaze has shifted to religion, and the

following fifteen short comments are extracted from that source. The original series numbers and dates have been retained here for easy reference.

a) **240. Women, Men and Religion**

Sun 08-Apr-2012

Men find security in physical dominance. Without that dominance most men feel sexually castrated. Lacking physical dominance (on the whole) women often seek security in deceit, or failing that, in magic. Magic is broadly expressed as spirituality. Magic, sorted as organized self-delusion, then better, a shared delusion, is what we call religion. This religious magic is potent stuff for controlling human beings, since few are driven by impartial evidence based thinking. Perceiving the power of religious magic, men hijack the formula by force and kick women out of the temple. Thus all religions which progress to governing the lives of citizens are based on male sexual insecurity sanctified by the state. [a reference: <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/world/secrets-of-divine-women-exposed-20120407-1wi1j.html>]

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b) **227. A Vocation**

Sun Oct-03-2010

The good face of organized religion is that it creates a social space. This is a space which at its best lies outside the thrall of daily economic contest and role play, a place where people regardless of status, race, gender or occupation can meet and reflect on their humanity. We all know that "at its best" is a fragile condition, and in the case of religion has had a bumpy history. The competition from other social spaces nowadays is fierce. Organized religion also has crippling negatives. In most cultures, it has routinely been controlled by old men, in individual cases with wisdom and tolerance, but in the aggregate over time, as a power tool of social



control and sexual control, enforced by exclusion, persecution and war. In the aggregate over time, the evidence is overwhelming that religion has never made good men and women from bad men and women. Its moral parade has been a pretence for other agendas. The animal routines of strutting, preening, fighting, feeding and breeding don't need a religion to sanctify them, and secular cultures have been perfectly capable of managing them. We need to respect our biology, but it is not what defines us as human. Surely it is time to grow up and find our proper human vocation. If people must talk of a god, and many seem to feel the need, then that vocation, the godly role if you like, is our choice to make. The care and management of a small planet, with all the living things upon it might not be a bad choice.

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c) **206. Riddle Time**

2007

What do computer games, religion, poetry and art have in common? Well, a kind of artistry perhaps. But let's come down to artistry itself. All artistry is a public illusion in which we are licensed to park our private delusions.

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d) **199. Meddling Priests**

Sun 04-06-2006

One of the functions of religions, together with their usual quota of gods, is to provide employment for certain personality types. Priests in their many forms - pastors, imams, witch doctors, missionaries, whatever .. - are characters who lust to exercise moral power over other people. Indeed many, if not most people seem to want someone to exercise that power, however nominally. Perhaps it comes from the conditioning of parental authority. Anyway, the

priestly class, having no more imagination than average, pick up on some local dogma and sell it as their own, claiming a moral imperative. A few are indeed saints. Sadly though, on average, the moral calibre of priestly types is rarely better than average, and pretty often worse. Above all, they are intolerant of any challenge to their moral hegemony. Historically they have been a major source of hatred, fratricide and oppression, whatever the dogma in their book of magic. There is no reason to believe that will ever change.

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e) **195. The Ark of Common Belief**

Sun 05-03-2006

From the evidence of history, religions are needed. Religions are supermarket explanations for the outer limits of human understanding, and that is all the explanation that most people seem to want. The supermarket status of the explanation itself is an attraction, for it guarantees a fellowship of shared belief. Religions are also social vehicles through which individuals express their ideal moral character, sometimes even when their daily lives allow little space for the ideal. That moral expression will find an outlet, regardless of the religious brand chosen from the local supermarket of the spirits. Thus religion is a licence to do good. The seven deadly sins, and plenty more, will also be justified and rationalized by individuals and social groups, using whatever religious brand they happen to have chosen, and regardless of what the dogma of their religious texts proclaim. Exclusion, persecution and unkindness will all be available for members of the chosen religion to inflict on non-group members - those who have chosen another brand. Thus religion is a licence to do evil. When the outer limits of human understanding are expressed with a human rather than a supernatural reference, the religion is named an ideology instead (communism, Confucianism, capitalism etc). In the end this matters

little, for all the same psychological mechanisms for belief and action apply.

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f) **187. Hidden Incentives**

Tue 18-10-2005

So you want to change the world ? You have invented a wonderful new system/method/ideology/religion ? Yes, it works for your friends and admirers. Let's sell it to the mass marketers : the politicians, the corporations, the professional promoters. But wait a minute ...

The mass manipulation of populations by governments, mass education, populist religious promotion etc. often has horrendous outcomes. We have a recorded species history of around six millennia of terrible outcomes with this kind of stuff. Why? Well it's partly because the **\*\*incentives\*\*** any system or ideology or 'method' or 'approach' sets up apply quite differently:

- a) to the target group (citizens, students, devotees, whoever..);
- b) to the agents who deliver it (e.g. civil servants, corporate employees, priests, teachers ...);
- c) to the controllers (so-called administrators, politicians .. and the rest).

It is almost always true that the incentives and rewards flowing to controllers are the strongest predictors of outcomes, those accruing to the delivering agents, the second most powerful predictors, and those applying to the target group (i.e. the explicit content of the ideology, system etc) are the least effective, and frequently overwhelmed.

g) **182. God Stuff**

Mon 01-08-2005

God is to human language as the zero is to mathematics. Thus god in an infinitude of isolation is without substance or value, but makes the most useful of all digits when dreams are multiplied by words. There is no doubt about the power of the god digit in any discourse amongst humans, and we cannot discount it there, for human actions follow where thought leads. Yet when our voices cease, my bet (another empty value to be sure) is that all kingdoms of heaven and hell will come to a zero sum game.

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h) **179. Grown-up Lies**

Wed 29-06-2005

Grown-ups tell lies for a living. They are also required to lie that they tell the truth. This second bit goes by lots of names, like corporatism, or keeping your job, or religion, or Mao Zedong's little red book of wickedness. No matter. The big mystery is why real truth-telling still hangs on by its fingernails, and from time to time claws open the door to the abyss by a crack. It seems that all the lie-telling cyclically brings individuals, companies and cultures to collapse. Then there's a moment of truth, a big bang, an Armageddon, a bankruptcy ... and the whole trick starts again in a different party suit. Same old lies though.

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i) **175. The First Problem of Politics**

Wed Dec-29-2004

The first problem of politics has always been how to trap wandering minds into a holding pattern of shared purpose.

For hunter-gatherers and peasant farmers, a basic need for food and the procession of seasons set the mould. Every lifestyle since has had its rituals and ceremonies - deliberate structures to organize routines of behaviour. Religions and ideologies are extensions of the ritual process, drastically inflated with solemn nonsense.

The common thread in all of this stuff is that doubt and whimsy are not welcome.

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j) **168. Public Belief**

Wed 03-11-2004

Wherever religion or ideology have claimed a strong hold on the public mind, the political consequences have been mostly evil. The conditions which make possible this failure of civil life are based in child rearing and education, though the catalyst for disaster may be economics.

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k) **167. God Talk**

Sat 23-10-2004

God is the trickster alter ego of self-talk. This chameleon gent is a partner needed, perhaps, by lots of folk, but when he gets control of the asylum, things tend to get apocalyptic, so the common sense of merely human judgements, and the tolerance that comes from knowing one's own frailty -- these qualities are lost in the rush to follow the trickster Harlequin's confident deceptions.

l) **160. Werewolves**

Thu Dec-18-2003

I meet you on the street, ask some simple favour. You are generous in unexpected ways, noble perhaps. You are a private man or woman, free to be entirely human. I meet you as the agent of an institution. You are a beast. Gathered to a group, a religion, a nation, your mind is a pack mind, your lust is a blood lust; any tolerance is a weakness to the mission. Fearful of your incapacity to murder alone, you bay for a leader or a god to absolve your evil with all the lies of power.

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m) **155. Creed Caper**

Saturday 17 May, 2003

Whatever the creed, there are believers. Wherever believers exist, there is the chance for power of some kind. Whenever power can be scented, predators gather like jackals. That is the human story. What kind of creed? Any at all -- religion, politics, ideology, sport, company policy, a book on how to grow petunias... . What of the believers? They crave the idea of a comfort zone, a path already hewn, a promise of future pleasure. Most of all, they fear to be original, and strangely, for the permission to follow, they will suffer any hardship and commit almost any atrocity. What of the predators? They are at all levels of the food chain, some only slightly less enmeshed than the entirely credulous. But in small ways or large, they will break the faith for advantage. At the top of the hierarchy, they are apt to be lifetime hypocrites. Such leaders are certain that public piety and private cynicism is 'the reality of power', and despise the candid. By and large, they rule the human world.

This all began with creeds. A creed on growing petunias is less virulent than a creed on eternal salvation. Why? The petunias grow

or they don't grow. Visitors from the dead with an inside story on salvation are not a daily event. Even the rumour of such visits has kept entire religions in business for millennia. For lifetime hypocrites, it is smart to pick a bullet-proof cover. Eternity is the best deal going, when it can turn a profit. Wasn't it Saint Thomas Aquinas who said, "never trust a man of one book" ?

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n) **140. Trust**

@30 June 2002

That state of mind which gives us freedom to act is governed by trust. Trust is the first pillar of civilized living. It is fairly easy to maintain trust in a village society, difficult in a city, and extremely difficult in a complex modern economy. Religion is a wishful super solution to the trust problem. I for one trust in no god. The best mortal answer I can find is to seek in others that honesty which I expect of myself. Without trust in our environment, in human relationships, and in the institutions of our cultures, we are reduced to a savage horde. It follows that those who counterfeit trust for short term gain are the enemies of civilization.

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o) **134. Rumours of Magic**

@20 December 2001

Religions are organized rumours of magic for Muggles.

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## **5. Myth and Poetic Imagination**

The human psyche craves an imaginative space within which all the mysteries, disappointments and wonders of experience may be stored. That space must have borders at the very edges of perception, and a light that is colder than sunshine yet warmer than dusk. Those who dwell within this realm are to be known, yet barely known. They will have names for their parts, but the whole may be unspeakable. Here, good will never be entirely lost, no more than we can believe ourselves to be wholly bad, yet the memory of catastrophe will never be less than a shadow and may at times bear down with the weight of a mountain. In every landscape of our faery land a spark of courage will light the path of hope, but the rank evil of despair will be a dark rider on our heels.

In this mythic place we find the Bible and Laotian dragons, the Icelandic Eddas, the Dusun creation myths, the Qur'an (القرآن), the Rainbow Serpent, the Torah (תּוֹרָה), the Vedas (वेदा), the Inca cosmology, the Communist Manifesto, ancestor spirits, Tolkien's Ring of Power, the astrological almanac, Gaia, records of the Gautama Buddha and Darwin's Origin of the Species.

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## **6. Religion is a Psychic Bank**

A religion is a kind of psychic bank, created by fear and hope, wherein are stored all those things which an individual finds most vulnerable: the authority to judge right from wrong, the traffic rules for getting along with other beings, the guarantee of self-worth, a



rationale for the miracle of creation and the barren waste of death. Above all, an assurance of sanity when other certainties fall away. God is the gatekeeper who holds dreams within bounds, chastises the spirit for its hubris, and keeps its seed alive in the furnace of self-doubt. Since this construct of a psychic bank is declared inviolate from personal frailty, the investor is desperate to attract like-minded believers.

A religion of one has walls so permeable that its creator and client must live in constant terror of self-betrayal. With a religion of two it can safely be said that all the world art mad but thou and I. A religion of millions, with a millennium of history, so sustains the majority of its clients that they may background it in the routines of survival, save for icons to mark life changes. Yet for these icons they will fight to the death. Curious that the keeper of dreams should extract more loyalty in the end than consciousness itself.

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## **7. Knowing Religious Mendacity**

Knowingness is like the *Wayang Kulit*, a Javanese shadow play flitting from one half guessed reality to another, where the audience, the puppets and the puppet master are forever merging ambiguously, one into the other.

But we are greedy, insecure children, wanting love and a sure home. Where there is no certainty, we proclaim there is one certainty and call it faith. Where there is no compassion, we proclaim that there is supreme compassion and call it the spirit. Where there is no wisdom, we proclaim omniscient wisdom and call it god.

Let us be candid. Religious dogma is mumbo jumbo. The archbishop and the witch doctor practice the same trade. Clearly there has always been a demand for their services, and by the look of it there always will be. The doctrine, in the end, doesn't matter so much, though it may be a rationale for fewer murders if the surface text is benign.

Whatever the doctrine, it will be subverted to a hall of mirrors, reflecting all the psychodramas of human hope, from revenge to self-righteous legalism to gentle self-indulgence. Religion is an opaque brew of self-deception and mendacity. At what point does the salesman begin to believe his own spiel that he has the best insurance policy to sell? The truth can never be known except in fleeting moments of private insight. A claim to piety is an easy option for every dude who wants to climb the greasy pole of ambition.

Leading the multitudes of accepting souls is a small army of hypocrites. At least, I am convinced of this from watching the human cavalcade for decades. Nor can the hypocrites be beaten, for it is a conspiracy reborn in every generation and in every culture among the sharp, bright, ruthless minds of those who would claim the mantle of power. The Marxist cadre, the bishop, the imam, the industrialist, the politician, are one man and one woman.

What should a man do? Should he wear the mitre of the archbishop, and smite the non-conspirators to a purgatory of cultural exclusion? Should he clothe himself in the fellowship of shared belief and the comfort of simple ritual, become one of the flock? Should he remain an outlander, riding the boundary of doubt, forever barred from the largesse of power or the comfort of cultural acceptance? How should a man keep his humanity and remain a free spirit?

## **8. Supernatural or Co-Natural?**

Almost all religions deal with the concept of a reality which is not the reality of normal human perception. The sociology of this other reality is, in many ways, what separates the religions. At one extreme, some animists conceive of an almost simultaneous co-nature, effectively occupying the same space and at least overlapping the time dimension on our side of the divide. Life forms in the alternate world have, as it were, a different biology, so that animals may have higher intelligence, while "inanimate" objects such as hills or rocks may also have intelligence.

It is not necessarily the case that these alternate life forms can wholly control their own fate, or freely move across the divide of the worlds. However they are held to be aware of a symbiotic relationship with our world, and may be damaged by human misbehaviour. Central to the co-dependence of worlds is the notion of equilibrium, the unpredictable consequences which may arise from disturbing that equilibrium, and the central role of humans in preserving natural systems in balance.

Human societies with this kind of belief structure tend to be hunter-gatherers, intensely aware of seasonal cycles and their own precarious role in the ecostructure. Their sensitivity and emphasis on natural balance has preserved them across vast stretches of time.

Changing patterns of human settlement, with more established centres of power than the nomadic lifestyle, invited an evolution of the spiritual world. Greeks, Persians, Nordic peoples and others

developed pantheons of super-gods who were unabashedly humans writ large. Special godly qualities however went along with exclusive accommodation on Mount Olympus, Asgaard (across the rainbow bridge), and so on, from whence the gods would make periodic raids on earthly domains to claim allegiance or wreak havoc.

Whereas the mortality of co-nature was scarcely an issue, the immortality of egotistical super-gods was seen as a gift, which in certain circumstances might be diminished. And whereas it was foolish for a mortal to challenge the gods (*hubris*), a canny human might certainly play one god against another. In short, the religions which cameoed families of super-gods were perfect foils to earthly societies which centered around regional warlords and endemic banditry.

So-called "established" religions, especially those in the Judaic tradition (Judaism, Christianity, Islam etc.), reinterpret the geography and sociology of the alternate world with carefully delineated domains of heaven and hell. In this they built on intermediate belief systems of super-god families. In another sense they drew directly from the total dependence of desert nomads on a sparse, harsh, almost featureless natural desert environment. Clearly desert nomads were dependent upon an unseen power, and equally clearly such a power would claim superior accommodation for itself elsewhere.

The squabbling families of super-gods serving peasants and regional warlords on the fertile plains must have seemed effete to free ranging tent-dwellers. At the same time they had come to understand the power of concentrated authority. The resultant god is an unseen power, omnipotent, omniscient, living elsewhere but somehow with a constant command of local human events. In other words, he (certainly he) was the chieftain who would, his lackeys

felt, be aware of all transgressions and infidelities even though his tent was ten day's camel ride away across the sand dunes.

As it happened, the unseen engulfing tyranny of a monstrous single god would prove to be transportable to almost all human societies, difficult to reason against, perilous to ridicule and a standing defence for patriarchal authority everywhere. The focus of religion had clearly moved from the need to balance parallel worlds to a requirement to propitiate a remote authority. With this shift went a loss of the previous intense personal responsibility of each man and woman as a warden for their local environment. The remote god, lacking a local zoo to keep it amused, is presumed to interfere in the personal minutiae of individual human behaviour. Thus co-nature has become super-nature to which human immigration is only possible by submitting to the peculiar behavioural proscriptions of the foreign host.

Of all the modalities of human society, the urban industrial and post-industrial variants are not proving terribly hospitable to theistic tyranny. For one thing, the tendency to democracy itself, with all its messy compromise, is antithetical to unaccountable power. But most critically, the whole technological and scientific foundation of modern societies is built upon finding answers to matters which had been considered the province of god and his agents. Moreover, the scientific and technical answers have turned out to be overwhelmingly more effective and congenial than the theistic proscriptions. This is not a comfortable situation for an all-knowing, all-powerful god.

Curiously, the old notion of co-nature, balance, the human as nature's warden is much more appealing to men and women in the late twentieth century, and most so-called new-age religions seem to be heading in that direction.

## **9. Supermarket of the Spirits**

There usen't to be much choice about it. You took the religion of your fathers or you burned, if not on the stake, at least in hell. That is a proposition still facing a large segment of the world's population in one form or another. Yet in the heartlands of our post-industrial cultures you can take your pick in the supermarket of the spirits.

There's a good likelihood that mum and dad cleave to different sects, or different religions. There is a hazy continuum from your shroud-wrapped enthusiasts for Middle Eastern desert gods (the so-called Judaic religions and their cousins), to crystals and tarot cards, to the neo-religious sects of fringe conservationists, political ideologues and football groupies.

You would think that with this cornucopia of quick magic on display, the customers would make some rational comparisons, go for the biggest bonus coupons, or even maybe wonder aloud about the bottom line value of the whole business. Not a bit of it. If we look at contenders in the race of the saviours, three market leaders are pretty clearly Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. They hit the market in that order, with separations of up to a thousand years. A funny thing is that the sophistication of their guiding philosophies shows a linear decline in the same order.

The Islamic view of the universe is (in my view) pretty simple-minded stuff as cosmology, but seeks social cohesion through an adherence to shared ritual prohibitions. Christianity doesn't do much better with its cosmology, but leaves some space for unconditional compassion, which is a definite social asset. Judaism,

the antecedent of both, can be marginally more intelligent in a modern interpretation, but is still handicapped by notions of ethnic exclusivity and tribal vengeance. The oldest of all seems to me to embed the wisest exploration of consciousness. Buddhism, in its historically original expression, does have some impressive philosophical insights (familiar to Indian thinkers of its era), and significantly, keeps the whole supernatural bit at arms length. The public presentation of Buddhism across centuries and cultures has, of course, also had to come with all the spirits (avatars), gimmicks and trinkets demanded by popular taste. So what is the state of competition between these products?

There is not much doubt about it. Islam had been winning hands down amongst the needy, at least before its latest embrace by *jihadi* (جهادي) assassins. The voodoo end of Christianity is a hit where white picket fence suburbia reigns. The bread & circuses, crowd pleasing, ritual front end to a god-story is what counts for public approval. An appendix of good causes acceptable to the creed – say some help for widows, orphans or the poor – can also assist wonderfully with marketing. The lessons are clear enough.

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## 10. The Buddhist Option

Religions as cultural artifacts have always been weapons. The ring of piety is a dangerous power game. Nevertheless, that reflection which gives rise to religious ideas, however warped they may be, is embedded in the design of our psyches and will not be denied. There is much challenge in directing the religious tendency towards

humour, tolerance and beneficence, and preserving its currents from poisonous infusions of dogma, manipulation and hierarchy.

As established religions go, Buddhism has seemed to me for some time to be the most promising vehicle for broad religious expression. Its best precepts appear more mature and sophisticated than those of Judeo-Christian religions, and its tendencies less able to be stolen as vestments by power crazy politicians. They try of course, and the suburban Buddhist priesthood in, say, Japan, is as corrupted as any papal nuncio. Buddhist factions in a nation as unhappy as Myanmar (Burma) have sometimes shown a murderous intolerance of other creeds and ethnicities as deadly as any Moslem jihadi or Christian fundamentalist. But the discipline of self-knowledge implicit in Buddhist practice has preserved its essential integrity in a way that appeals to the textual integrity of a Qur'an or Bible or Torah can never match.

For these reasons, among others perhaps, a Western form of Buddhism has been attracting some exceptional minds to its shelter. Cognitive aspects of this neo-Buddhism are explored in a fascinating book by Varela, Thompson & Rosch. They note that:

".. all of the reflective traditions in human history - philosophy, science, psychoanalysis, religion, meditation - have challenged the naive sense of self. No tradition has ever claimed to discover an independent, fixed, or unitary self within the world of experience." [Varela J, E Thompson & E Rosch *The Embodied Mind : Cognitive Science and Human Experience* , pub. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1991:59].

This dilemma is confronted directly in Buddhist philosophy, where the struggle to accept the perceived non-reality of self is a major part of Buddhist practice. Drawing on Buddhist traditions, Varela,



Thompson & Rosch mount a quite persuasive argument (for me anyway) that by learning to discipline the human mind in a principled way which involves subduing illusions of selfhood, one can in fact analyse many of mind's important properties.

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## **11. The Inscrutable Face of Lady Luck**

Humans are practical about their superstitions. A superstition, of course, is somebody else's religion, and religion is a psychological device for the management of luck. So what is luck?

- Luck is a convergence of desirable (or undesirable) effects from an indeterminate source via inexplicable means.
- The management of luck is a heuristic process of channeling power in ways that are known or believed to be effective, even though the medium is not understood.
- The medium and the source of religious luck are claimed to be supernatural, and each religion claims to channel the power which instantiates that luck.
- Every religion without exception seeks to bolster its quota of inexplicable supernatural power with the more certain temporal power of human authority.
- There is always a fusion of temporal power and imputed supernatural power, so that any real absence of the latter can be indefinitely covered by assertion of the former.
- The focused power of a religion can indeed deliver "luck" to individuals in a constituency of believers through the covert and overt support of constituency members for each other.

If you ask someone who can't make much sense of the idea of a god (say, someone like me) whether they believe in Luck, most will scratch their heads and admit that in some sense they do.

If you ask further as to what they mean by Luck they will be even more troubled, but conclude that too often events just don't fall out according to their calculation of chance. With some warmth they will recall, if they are like me, that time and again events seem to conspire to exasperate, or handicap them, or to waste time, or just to go wrong when they shouldn't. My own life (your life?) has been a catalogue of mishaps of this kind, mixed often with an odd kind of saving grace where one misfortune forestalls an even greater disaster. Those who know me for any length of time (not many) soon develop the expectation that I am disaster prone. Nowadays I merely sigh, telling myself that the indulgence of fury will only provoke the warped humour of my guardian angel to further outrages.

When I look around, some others seem unreasonably touched by good Luck, like gamblers who never lose, whatever their personal transgressions. Others attract major catastrophe from no fault of their own, which leaves me counting my blessings.

This brings us back to the god thing. Does it have a moral core? Contemporary North Asian folk, the Chinese and Japanese are, as cultural groups, steadfastly skeptical about moral gods yet altogether obsessed with propitiating Luck, whatever it is. Of course, superhuman morality has been road tested in various Asian philosophies - for example in parts of Chinese belief dating from the Chou Dynasty - but it has rarely had a defining role. So what is a religion?

I suspect, strongly, that God as projected by the Christians and similar cults, is preeminently a device for managing Luck, and that by proposing a moral, personal deity they are laying on this god some kind of pressure to come up with a world favourable to the godly. The evidence for their success is pretty patchy. After a couple of thousand years it is less than self-evident that the godly have been any more fortunate than anybody else.

Another angle could be that as immensely complex dynamic systems, we individuals are bound to engage the other systems of nature with certain biases. Everything from the arch of one's eyebrows to the electrical field around one's body must set up trains of probabilities. From the arcane effects of complexity theory on all of this, currents and events must be triggered in ways that are beyond the analysis of any human being.

If the argument from complexity theory makes any sense, then it must also be possible that under certain circumstances Luck must permute for good or ill. For example, if two people form an intimate relationship it is conceivable that the whimsies of Luck might impact upon their joint experience in entirely new ways for them. Actually predicting the direction of that change is another matter. There is an equation to defy any rocket scientist.

Whatever its origins, Luck defies reason. Reason may be a poor weapon to with which to slay supernatural challenges of any kind. Reason after all is no more than the principled use of our existing biological equipment. While cool common sense may deny it, the sense of another Presence can nevertheless be persuasive. Take the simple matter of socks, gremlins and the Laundry God. Now no experience has ever convinced me of the close company of gods with a working interest in human affairs. Gremlins though, that is another matter.

Socks are the conclusive evidence. It is irrefutable. I have never made a visit to a laundromat without losing at least one sock. Today it was three. This was in spite of taking the utmost care to count the damned things, running a finger around the inside of the washing machine, and peering into the stuffy gloom of the tumble dryer's innards. All rational processes were exhausted. The disappearing socks are definitely a supernatural phenomenon.

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## **12. Winners and Losers**

If religion is a device for the management of luck, then we would have to expect at least some of its followers to take a punt when the time comes to choose between one creed and another. Of course, religion is a vehicle for many other needs and emotions as well: a manifesto of defiance for the oppressed, a *dictat* of justification for the oppressors, a rationale for suffering to the deprived, a community of contact to the shy or lonely, and a licence for sexual management to the psychologically immature. This list is scarcely exhaustive, but explains well why religious phenomena are so tenacious.

Yet for all the personal needs and illusions that they satisfy, there remains the fact that religions are also mass movements which have their moments in history. Those mass movements, as with all tides of ideology, have inevitably been vehicles for atrocity, especially when sanctified by the state.

For example, hostility to non-believers has been historically characteristic of all Abrahamic religions and often used ruthlessly where the political possibility existed. The chronicle of savage wars and persecutions in the name of Christianity began from the time it was adopted as a state religion by the Roman Empire.

Islam was militant from its inception, and remains so. It swept into the Middle East on a tide of military victory, social renewal and shrewd tax breaks for the converted. That the next thousand years was a tale of stagnation and repression is perhaps another story. Yet the embers of enmity to outsiders never died.

Here is a quotation discussing the Euro-American problem with Barbary Coast (north African) pirate attacks in 1786:

“At the time, thousands of American and European trade ships entering the Mediterranean had been targeted by pirates from the Muslim Barbary states (modern-day North Africa). More than a million Westerners had been kidnapped, imprisoned and enslaved. Tripoli was the nexus for these operations. ... Thomas Jefferson, then the U.S. ambassador to France, reported to Secretary of State John Jay a conversation he'd had with Sidi Haji Abdul Rahman Adja, Tripoli's envoy to London, in 1786:

*The ambassador answered us that [their right] was founded on the Laws of the Prophet, that it was written in their Koran, that all nations who should not have answered their authority were sinners, that it was their right and duty to make war upon them wherever they could be found, and to make slaves of all they could take as prisoners, and that every Mussulman who should be slain in battle was sure to go to Paradise.”* [ Ali A. Rizvi in the Huffington Post, 5 May 2013 at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ali-a-rizvi/an-atheist-muslims-perspective-on-the-root-causes-of-islamist-jihadism-and-the-politics-of-islamophobia\\_b\\_3159286.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=world](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ali-a-rizvi/an-atheist-muslims-perspective-on-the-root-causes-of-islamist-jihadism-and-the-politics-of-islamophobia_b_3159286.html?utm_hp_ref=world) ]

The current perspective on Islam hardly seems more hopeful in those latitudes where whole populations are under stress. This, from Bangladesh (May 2013):

“Hundreds of thousands of protesters demanding a new blasphemy law blocked highways and fought running battles with police on Sunday, leaving at least 10 people dead and hundreds injured in the Bangladeshi capital.

Chanting "Allahu Akbar!" ("God is greatest!") and "One point, One demand: Atheists must be hanged", activists from Hifazat-e-Islam marched along at least six highways, blocking transport between Dhaka and other cities and towns.  
(<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/05/20135510413485449.html> )

Today, when we look at the Islamic resurgence and its new tide of converts we see in many ways a religion which continues to be a tool of the politically ambitious while posing as a populist path to liberation. In a capitalist world, the missionary drive is fueled on Saudi petrodollars and misused Irani public funds, not to mention the power games of Western imperialism and Israeli manipulation.

The zealot's passion might be moved by Wahabi (وهابية) fundamentalism (in the Sunni case), and the hand behind the curtain might belong to that universally amoral 5 star hotel species, the political control junkies. At street level though, what we see is the pain of social change from cultural and industrial upheaval (the Middle East is even more polluted than China), desperate economic insecurity, and a perceived outlet in revenge for a thousand years of humiliation. The scapegoats are many, but scratch the paint off this fury and you are likely to find self-loathing and despair. History has been here before.

Large swathes of central, south and south east Asia have long been Islamic, and few areas are prospering. Who are today's new converts? Largely African, both continental and American-African. The most unlucky of all peoples. In short, the losers. Who can blame them for grasping at a creed that at this moment in its history is so manifestly the property of oppressed peoples? Conversely, why would the educated and successful in any numbers choose Islam? To this day it resorts to primitive mechanisms of coercion, such as forced conversion through marriage, and the punishment by death for those who simply want to walk away from its version of faith.

Even their most abject apologists could scarcely claim that Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Egypt and the rest are free societies (although they are also very different from each other). Pakistan a generation

after partition into an "Islamic state" is a nightmare of corruption, incompetence and fratricidal murder.

Turkey is a more promising case. 98% Muslim, in many ways Turkey incubated the Islamic religion to maturity. Yet early in the twentieth century Kemal Atatürk cast off the suffocating cloak of state theism with only limited success. Turkey is still a nation racked by cruelty and corruption, but now gradually finding some Islamic form of moderation in the daily life of an emerging middle class. We can only wish this social evolution every success. It seems that education and economic opportunity for everyman and especially for everywoman is the surest guarantee of less virulent religious practice. Simply outlawing some brand of religion does not abolish the cultural habits which support it. Thus the failed secular Ba'athist (البعث) experiments in Iraq and Syria, delivered under conditions of tyranny, could not easily yield a dividend of tolerance and growth.

What about Malaysia, and the largest Islamic nation of all, Indonesia? Culturally these are very different societies than those in central and south Asia, and as in most places, plain people live ordinary lives of cheerful good will. But again we see that much of the national financial prosperity has been buttered on by a small, despised, mercantile Chinese class. Well intentioned proscriptions against usury in the Q'ran have, like so many common sense directives in holy books, sometimes backfired, working to stifle any sensible philosophy of enterprise, while fostering corruption. In such cases however it is very hard to separate older patterns of cultural attitude from the syncretic influence of introduced religion (which may merely become a rationalization for existing behaviour). There is nothing inherently anti-commercial in Islam, if the Prophet's own

wife was any guide, and in various cultural settings Islamic traders have had outstanding success across the centuries.

In summary, beneath a wide umbrella of Moslem cultures, there are qualities of hospitality, self-discipline and tolerance in the daily lives of countless ordinary Moslem people which are admirable. However it remains true that the translation of Islam on the scale of the nation state has not usually been a happy one. The official separation of church and state was a game changer for Christianity, but has not yet found the necessary interpretation through Islam, even in Turkey.

What sort of modern outcomes have the areas of Buddhist influence yielded up? Again, underlying cultural patterns have led to very different outcomes. For example, although the Indic cultures of South Asia and the Sinitic cultures of East Asia have drawn much from each other, they remain utterly distinct in outlook and style.

Without the monotheistic intolerance of Judaic/Ahrahamic religions, Buddhist cultural ideas, moving eastward from India, have generally continued to accommodate much older co-pantheons of spirits and minor gods. Yet for over a century some rather odd European-American influence has been impacting on East Asia, but taken far longer to backwash at a popular level in South Asia.

In the first half of the twentieth century the Japanese combined Western materialist imitation with a state Shinto revival. The result was a militarist state that collapsed in flames. Since then most Japanese have backed off public ideologies, elected political fixers, not visionaries, and concentrated on pursuing prosperity. Shinto gods have largely retreated to the status of backyard good luck charms. This worked for a while, but the mercantile success of neighbouring countries has taken the edge off self congratulation,



the political class is sclerotic with overtones of suppressed fascist attitude, the population is declining, and it is becoming clear that Japanese people as a group are wishing for some new cultural or religious certainties to give them direction. They have conspicuously rejected the latest South Korean solution of planting Christian churches on every empty intersection.

The experience of Sinitic Asia has been substantially different from the that of the Japanese. It is a long and bloody story, but culminating in 1949 the Chinese and others punted on Marxism to supply both rice and spiritual uplift. It was a catastrophic gamble, and we are still watching the conversion of state Communism into a form of Capitalism which can look uncannily like the National Socialism of Germany's Third Reich.

Yet ideology is not dead in Asia or anywhere else. Ideology is that engine of illusion in the mind which imparts energy and direction towards invisible goals. Humans seem to need it. My own guess is that human infants take so long to become independent adults that their long-suffering parents are genetically programmed to live on hope, and provide sustenance & protection where no repayment is obvious. The ideology of care for the aged is a first extension of this.

So we are seeing newly prosperous Sinitic cultures casting around for an ideology. Shinto is a Japanese possession, and Japanese are not well liked in the rest of Asia. Popular Buddhism is preeminently a creed of suffering, and the new Asians don't want to know about misfortune or resignation. Confucian ideology was eulogized by the likes of Singapore's modern founder, Lee Kuan Yew and other political fixers, but their brand of it represents a patriarchal authoritarianism which fits ill with the young's yearning for self-expression and freedom. Many also blame it for the straightjacket that repressed China for two millennia.

Islam has never been on the Chinese agenda as a national proposition, notwithstanding that many Muslims have played prominent roles in China's history, especially since the Yuan Dynasty (元朝 1271-1368) when there was a large influx of Persian traders. Within modern China there are at least ten different kinds of Muslim populations whose total numbers are hazy (the CIA World Factbook estimates 27 million), but still miniscule within the Chinese mass. They range from Uigers (ئۇيغۇر, 维吾尔) in Xinxiang, whom the Chinese state treats as incipiently subversive terrorists, to millions of thoroughly Sinicized Muslims known as Hui (回族). Extracting the history of these peoples is tricky (especially on the subject of massacres) since Chinese history, ancient and modern, is thoroughly massaged for propaganda purposes. We can say with some certainty though that China will never be an Islamic state.

Christian missionaries historically had a tough time in China. They were agents of a cultural imperialism that went hand in hand with Western commercial piracy and political thuggery. Now, over a period of a half century or more, common people have had an indelible lesson that exploitation, thuggery and repression are no monopoly of imperial powers. The home grown variety has proved to be even worse. Meanwhile they have seen the material success of the West, and through the media of film, television and magazines have formed an impression that Western peoples live much better lives (discounting TV homicides!) All these things they seek to imitate with untempered enthusiasm. The rich are busy emigrating, or at least sending their pampered children to schools in America, Canada, Australia, England etc.

It is scarcely surprising that the ideological antennae of many have also swung in the direction of so much apparent good luck. Surely

the god(s) have smiled on the Western peoples. If you are going to propitiate a deity, why not choose one with a proven track record? Anyway, the appeal can still be made to ancient authority. It happens that Confucius, who was fairly circumspect about religion, did seem to believe in a personal god.

Korea was the first east Asian nation to recently go Christian in a big way; (I discount the Philippines, which has a different history altogether). Christianity in Korea is not the creed of the oppressed. It is worn on the sleeve of the new yuppies, the young, educated and upwardly mobile. And so it is turning out in Taiwan and mainland China.

The neo-Confucian reaction of authority figures in Singapore is unlikely in the end to contain the Christian infection. I predict that the social and political consequences over a couple of generations could be very significant. Christianity in these latitudes is a successful vehicle for positive thinking, a lucky charm. For a brief moment it is a religion for the winners. Once established on the political landscape it will, of course, become a channel for all those other seasons of the human soul that have claimed religious attention.

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### **13. The Stability of Belief**

Rituals and beliefs of all kinds are self-adjusting devices. What they stabilize may be as varied as the self-respect of the individual or the perpetuation of a criminal organization. Perpetuation is actually a major thread, for whatever has some definition in our consciousness

will attract an expectation that it might, should or even must continue. The expectation easily becomes ideological and then religious (when it is kicked upstairs to the realm of universal truth).

In every class that I have ever taught, each student chooses a seat on the first day, and thereafter most can only be budged from it by something approaching aggression. This behaviour is preservative in the sense that the routinization of behaviour saves us from constant, time-consuming choices. It is therefore not surprising that we seem programmed to attach moral propriety to the familiar. Religion and its gods is a projection of this process, a set of rules for a shelf company that can be turned to whatever purpose opportunity presents.

Static rules, rituals, and beliefs work best of course in stable social orders, amongst people whose daily behaviour has changed little over generations. The religiosity and conservatism of most immigrants to the New World reflects such a background. In a whirlwind of change, temporary employment and short term dwelling, a strong set of established rituals can become part of the problem (though some would argue that it preserves core values).

When an individual is faced with new social and economic surroundings which no longer support his values (and may challenge them openly), then three possibilities arise. That individual can suffer stress, psychotic disjunction and perhaps physical breakdown. He can declare the world hostile and evil. Or he can embrace new beliefs more consonant with new conditions. This last, the betrayal of old values, might be a source of guilt for the reflective, but for the vast majority it is marked by a kind of selective forgetting and denial. I have seen my own relatives undergo such a transformation as they unconsciously blend with the newly encountered mores of upper middle class neighbours.

A few of us seem to be almost predestined outsiders. From the earliest memories, I have been repelled by ritual and routinized belief. From the very beginning this has put me beyond the ambit of community. The separation is not based on the outrage at betrayal felt by the fundamentalist fanatic. It is not that I find the world evil because it does not conform to my own notions of proper order. The way of the terrorist is not my way, for I claim no monopoly of wisdom, not any certainty that one ritual would be an improvement on that which it replaced. Those who find the outsider dangerous are presuming an attachment in him to some foreign, hostile ritual, since they themselves require attachment to their own creed. But this particular outsider merely surveys their rituals wearily, recognizes the engine behind them, but for himself finds all equally superstitious. He envies those who find comfort in their hymns, their prayers, their cricket matches and their loves, but in the end can only walk a personal, whimsical, unattached path.

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## **14. Guesswork Versus Religion**

As an explanation of natural phenomena all religious dogma is superstition. This is the atheist speaking, yet is atheism merely insensitive to the mysterious? At the heart of a believer's contempt for the atheist is a mistaken idea that an atheist finds nothing in the universe which requires exceptional explanation. I am an agnostic, temperamentally inclined to atheism, who freely concedes that we exist in a tiny pool of light amid an ocean of darkness. Thankfully, that light has expanded from a pinpoint of consciousness to a dwelling area almost sufficient for a civilization.

Without doubt there is more between heaven and earth than is ever dreamed of in our philosophies. The courses of our daily lives, not to mention the rise and fall of our cultures, give hints of patterns fractionally revealed, of causes and consequences beyond our conception. Like an insect, blind to the universe save for our primitive sense organs, we seek to explain the fragments of interstellar order and chaos that impinge upon our lives.

The invention and propitiation of gods, or the more diffuse attempts to divine the course of fortune or luck through chicken entrails, biblical prophecies or astrological charts are a natural consequence of reflection. Our own cognitive mechanisms impose order on the universe of biological colonies we call a body (microbes constitute 90% of our cell count: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human\\_microbiome](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_microbiome) ). These mechanisms are bound to project a similar assumption of sentient order to their own superordinate control. To understand the source of this process is no reason to accept the validity of its projection into galactic explanation.

I might not know what is going on when the sky falls in, but neither do the pundits. When serious men and women look me in the eye and talk about the will of God I am forced to conclude a) that they are hypocrites, or b) that they have achieved some extraordinary degree of self-deception, or c) that there is some fundamental block in their mental processing which prevents a sound assessment of the arguments, or d) that I myself suffer from some or all of the above.

The investment in (a), hypocrisy, is probably very widespread indeed, for the social rewards are so substantial. We see a similar suspension of honest self-analysis in secular politics again and again. Why should religion be any different?

The argument from faith (as opposed to logic) seems to me to be a variant of b) above. We probably could not live with ourselves without a measure of self-deception. The aging rake has to believe in his own charm, or become alcoholic; our fearful and petty acts of daily cowardice have to be rationalized as strategic retreats in a nobler enterprise (like feeding the family). Our naked fear of capricious mortality has to be covered with the star-cloak of an all-knowing, all-wise god.

Religious belief based on c), a failure of intelligent thought, institutionalized stupidity, would be a minor aberration in a perfect world (for a wickedly funny account of stupidity by Guo Du in English and Chinese, see <http://blog.hiddenharmonies.org/2013/04/the-mystery-of-stupidity/>). If thirty-five years as a teacher and lecturer has taught me anything however, it is that you can never underestimate the naïveté of the general population, even that part of it which aspires to tertiary education. People who are clever in other ways can be absolute morons when faced with a search for larger causes. It is the rare computer programmer who makes a good computer systems analyst.

The largest number of people, alas, can neither program nor analyse. They are coaxed through educational processes on the saliva trail of accepted wisdom, and rewarded for regurgitating this predigested mush in approved ways. Ergo, superstition will always be with us, and Socrates would be asked to take poison in every likely human society.

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## **15. Part-time Space Travellers**

At least in my Anglo-Australian culture, most people most of the time are not terribly comfortable talking about "big picture" issues like religion. There used to be a social rule that one avoided politics, religion or money as potentially divisive conversational topics. The avoidance goes deeper than that though.

In nominally Christian communities like mainstream Australia and the UK, Heaven and Hell have become wry metaphors. To actually believe in Dante's Inferno, or in some misty Heaven with angels' harps, is rightly seen by the majority as pretty loopy. The transfer of Sunday radio time by the government broadcaster to religious charades is an instant turn-off for most normal people. Pressed, many more citizens will confess to a vague suspicion that spirits of the dead hang around the TV set, than those who count on regular commuter departures to a Heavenly Kingdom. In other words, the contemporary folk geography of supernatural worlds is much closer to traditional animism than to medieval Christianity.

Folk notions of Creation in the Western industrial economies are equally slippery. Few have yet made that leap which questions the need for explanations of an ultimate "Creator" at all. However, the Christian biblical story of Genesis gets little credence: a lovely parable, but as a literal explanation its absurdity has become a downright embarrassment. Indeed, the apparent attachment of most Muslims to literal belief in a similar traditional heaven is scoffed at as evidence for a lack of sophistication.

You could probably say that even amongst those who dislike the idea of hominoid genetic evolution, more would claim to descend



from the survivors of a wrecked interstellar space craft than be the long lost kin of Adam and Eve; (there are more spiritual space travellers with every new Hollywood blockbuster). The practice of modern religion, especially Christianity, thus tends to promote a philosophy of living while tacitly disowning the supernatural geography which is supposed to back it up.

Although mainstream Australian culture is now dominantly secular, having supplanted the sermon with football commentary, large numbers of people will still admit to "believe in a god" ... of some sort. This is sincere enough, but when challenged the thinking is rarely deeper than the Cosmic Clockmaker logic: "somebody must have made all this, and have kept it in order". As the global environment falls out of order, the second clause is wavering. Having accepted the premise implicit in the argument -- i.e. that universal Creation is a self-evident necessity-they are primed to accept any Creation story which seems reasonable (and may be argued into a larger theological package to go along with it). To most of them though, nowadays Star Trek looks a better bet than the Bible.

The corruption of reason in this substitution of new myths for old had an extreme and macabre expression in 1997 when thirty-nine American computer programmers who, all dressed neatly in Captain Kirk uniforms, committed mass suicide, presumably in order to rendezvous in cyberspace with the starship Enterprise (<http://www.findingdulcinea.com/news/on-this-day/March-April-08/On-this-Day--39-Heaven-s-Gate-Cult-Members-Found-Dead-after-Mass-Suicide.html> ). Were they unique? By no means. In 2012 two hundred cultists gathered in France waiting for the end of the world: *"... the group has gathered around Pic de Bugarach waiting the date, believing they will be taken aboard a star ship hidden inside the mountain"*.

( <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2120869/Heavens-Gate-cult-committed-mass-suicide-15-years-ago.html#ixzz2SVplveu6> ). At any given time somewhere in the world the same sort of mass delusion is going on.

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## **16. The Lens of Emotion: synchronizing public and private illusions**

Religion, nationalism and ideologies are always seized by political elites as devices to synchronize private dreams with a mass psychology. They are lenses to focus social values.

Though they claim to try, no public ideology can in practice quite determine inner desires. I have to surmise that the dreams of my contemporaries are often dark and violent, far more so than public sweetness can admit. Cinema is dreadfully honest in this respect with its orgies of revenge and violence.

The lens of ideology has the ghastly effect of mobilizing and legitimizing those private fantasies which machine gun their way across the silver screen. Every culture has some pathological characteristics, and every ideology (amongst which I count religions), no matter how benign its canon, finally becomes a vehicle for sanctifying those pathological characteristics. An ideology is a doorway into hearts and minds, and through that doorway, once opened, the agents of power and oppression will always travel.

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## **17. Ideology and the Treason of the Soul**

The young believe in ideologies. Ideologies have the cachet of moral purity and sexual power. Yet every ideology without fail is seized and betrayed by the articulate, ambitious leaders of the age. And as these moguls of opportunism rape the values which nurtured their power, they are followed by an army of pious imitators who, quoting chapter and verse, commit every atrocity to cover their small daily acts of cowardice.

Perversely, the success of an ideology can be measured by the durability of its betrayals. The lackadaisical slouch of Australian socialism was destroyed in a political term or two by a clutch of chocolate-cream yuppies, while the intoxicating fumes of Soviet vodka communism covered eighty years of murder and misery. For true ideological success however, we have to turn to the established religions.

When Mohammed rode out of the desert with answers fit for the civilizing of some desert Bedouins, he set the scene twelve hundred years of stagnation, hypocrisy and cruelty in the urban societies of the Middle East. With all the cleverness of self-interest, potentates and imams have plastered layers of prejudice on the Prophet's plans for the sensible management of a pre-literate society. The Christian process has been messier, more convoluted, but victim to exactly the same process. The perversion of Christ's message, whatever it was, certainly began with the gospel writers, and became a major industry with its institutionalization in Roman authority.

What is so depressing is that betrayal is a process without end. No denouement, no two thousand year failure to save humanity from

itself, no scandal or atrocity will prevent a hot gospeler in Texas or a mass-murdering dictator in central Africa or eastern Europe from declaring that they have finally got religion right. He or she will flourish a personal telegram from God. Then a million ardent protoplasms with credulous brains will rush into the abyss. Ideology is truly a treason of the soul.

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## **18. Of Ideology and Control**

An ideology is a set of ideas for governing values, decisions and actions. With a following of one, an ideology is relatively harmless unless its owner is a psychopath. Where two are believers, one man invariably has power over the other. As a cult for millions, the ideology will sway and drive them like a herd of cattle, and he who wields the dogma wields the whip.

Religions may have been the first ideologies; now we have the secular dogmas of economics, psychiatry, Darwinian biology, physics ... the list is long, and its very diffusion gives us some relief. Amongst these secular ideologies, communism and capitalism are overtly obsessed with political power, but all of them, regardless of content, become instruments of control.

In a great part of the world, organized religions are still the primary instruments of social management. Take Islam, which welded the Arabian tribes for one hundred years of glory, then held them in chains for another thousand years at the whim of Persians, Seljuks and Ottomans. Or the obscure Essene sect, remoulded by Paul (Παῦλος) and his successors into the Christian hegemony of

European power for a handful of bishops and princes, and a burden of guilt for the "flock" to be steered by: the "flock" as compliant men and women are so quaintly called from the pulpit.

From the earliest times religion and moral philosophy have been used as vehicles for persuasion, equally by good people and by scoundrels. The good would have been good with or without religion. The scoundrels have been given an impenetrable cover for their hypocrisy. Since the corruptible always outnumber the fair-minded in governments and instrumentalities of power by a wide margin, it is scarcely surprising that the net effect of religion has been a negative one.

The claim of most religions on our allegiance is that the world is imperfect, but that adherence to the faith will make it, at some future time of deliverance, perfect and a paradise for the believers. This is idealism of the most extreme kind, and no instance of its application in the last five thousand years has given any sound proof whatsoever that the promise of redemption will be realized through such faith. Where the world has improved at all, it has been where men and women have accepted a personal, secular responsibility to treat those within their community in a fair and humane manner.

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## **19. Cultural Pathologies**

We accept without question that there are psychological pathologies in the behaviour of some individuals. Societies take steps to protect

their members from the afflicted person, and the person from himself; (the effectiveness of such measures is another question).

For a long time it has seemed self-evident to me that cultures also suffer from pathologies. We could say in fact that all cultures have tendencies (different for each culture) which when taken to an extreme, result in large scale social dysfunction. Cultural relativism is a poor excuse for such dysfunction. Obvious examples would be sanctions for revenge, proscriptions on marriage, institutional racism, myths of being a chosen people (with permission to eliminate lesser mortals) and so on. Cultural pathologies are complex questions which require study, and I suspect, could be the basis for a whole new academic discipline.

It may be that the sheer complexity of human societies ensures a certain dynamic of incompetence. Poverty, war, suffering, hubris, self-destruction ... that is, human misery and failure, are overwhelmingly products of human cultural practices and beliefs. Nor is external correction an easy option: the whole cultural machine is an interlocking mechanism. The bulk of actors are invariably committed to their model and can conceive of no other options. Foreign aid or well-intentioned foreign advice will make little useful impact on a dysfunctional culture. Colonial coercion may have a certain effect for a time, but creates other, longer lasting distortions.

Societies do change, even remaking their core values for many members. It may no longer make sense however, to talk of core values for "whole societies" when the homogeneity of belief found in static traditional societies is reshaped into tapestry of individuals with access to very different levels of knowledge.

Two centuries of an industrial revolution have radically divided an educated elite from their ancestors' conceptions of world's end, New Age mumbo jumbo notwithstanding. Whether or not we are happier - a moot point - there has been at least some change in the competence of this elite of individuals, and the freedom to exercise competence, has been their salvation. Change has not been free. The global wars of the last century have, in a way, been projections of gross psychological disturbance to populations undergoing rapid change.

More universally, wherever hierarchies develop to stand between a man and his exercise of practical daily living, there lies the germ of conflict. You could whimsically say that our brave new world has generated hierarchies of exhaustion. The getting of a little competence by the few has left an army of wounded and deformed in its wake. The air is shrill with a rhetoric of "productivity", "efficiency" and "progress". When these clarion calls to advanced ideology fade into the brutal reality of fixing an engine, passing an exam or raising a family, it is not at all clear that many more folk are smarter, nobler or more able than their ancestors were three generations ago.

Electricity, polymers and futures markets are for the majority utterly mysterious miracles of faith. Self-selected rejects from the technical age flounder in a miasma of uncomprehended "scientific certainties" which for them are as oppressive as any medieval religious dogma. Covert revolt, cargo cults, the ritualization of education, and similar manifestations of unreason must be expected, and may finally bury us.

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## **20. Resetting the Mental Flow Charts**

It is the computer program in people's heads which has to change before civilizations becomes more substantive and enduring than their artifacts. Are we wholly defined by familiarity with using shrink wrapped vegetables and the digital watch? Isn't it rather more challenging to engineer a widespread understanding of the technologies that give rise to these wonders, not to mention re-jigging a new grasp of humanity's role in nature? Why is this so little recognized?

Perhaps some of the problem is that a truly educated citizen of the post industrial world is an immensely more complicated being than a typical functional being in a tribe or even a traditional nation state. There are huge new demands on our time and comprehension, yet there are not so many members of existing communities who have mastered even the simpler skills within culturally homogeneous groups and low-level technologies.

A new world citizen needs more than an abstract knowledge of comparative religions. To interact as an artisan rather than a victim he needs to wield a screwdriver, a keyboard, and half a dozen technical jargons. Then he needs the wisdom of Solomon to at once assert ancient values of human decency, and yet live cordially among folk who march to very different drums.

It is a liberal indulgence to pretend that cultural tolerance is a matter of not only of being colour blind, but also of being culture blind. The history of civil wars should teach us that rose coloured spectacles, blinkers and the ostrich position are no final defence in the real nitty-gritty of living together. No, worthwhile tolerance is



the much harder business of seeing difference and learning to live with it, of recognizing good will beneath the disguise of diverse and even repugnant custom.

We need to understand and work with (though not necessarily to like) sensitivities to difference, not only of colour, religion and cultural practice, but also to aptitude, knowledge, competence, energy, wealth and luck. The human task of surviving in such rocky terrain gives equal Darwinian value to the much disparaged gift of compassion, and to necessary qualities of tough minded fair judgement.

The most utterly vicious examples of intolerance have not come from the confused proprieties of remote cultures. Expressions of intolerance which still populate our mass media and political announcements are entirely traditional. Their substance has been around since humans came down from the trees. Fratricidal violence and sexual repression begin in the family, not in the electron dance of television worlds.

Murder has commonly been practiced by brother on brother in Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Ireland, Cambodia, China, Japan, Korea, Russia, Kashmir, Iran, Palestine, Germany, Indonesia ... in fact by a role call of the United Nations. These barbarisms are not about genetic differences, but are failures of cultural design. Every culture carries the seeds of self-destruction, which under particular circumstances bloom and contaminate all else. Cultural pathologies are, more often than not, official virtues in the dogma of the political elite; (there is a whole discipline of study here which needs to be developed).

The Chinese philosopher, Xúnzǐ (荀子; Hsün Tzu; Hsün K'uang; 312-230 B.C.) believed that people are naturally selfish and have to be

guided to virtue; (you would have to say that this project has scarcely succeeded in the intervening two millenia). Xúnzǐ understood the power of religion and ritual in enforcing social order, and was prescient in grasping the significance of agreed definitions in language (正名). Another stream of belief embodied by Mèngzǐ (孟子; Mencius; Meng<sup>4</sup> Tzu<sup>3</sup>; 373-288 BC) held that people tend to natural goodness. That is, the inherent goodness of the child can be led astray by the bad influence of surroundings (nature Vs nurture). The contrasting assumptions of Mèngzǐ and Xúnzǐ are themes we see played out in almost every human group. Whether it is a Zoroastrian heaven & hell, or arguments for "nurture" versus the biologist's "selfish gene" in the late twentieth century, templates of belief like this seem to universally separate "liberal" from "authoritarian" minds.

With such bedrocks of belief dividing my own students, I often wonder if a preference for tolerance can be taught. A skillful teacher may parade a fragment of history and sometimes change the class consensus of goodies & baddies for the moment. But if a student believes in his bones that people are, say, inherently evil, are we really able to teach him tolerance and compassion for that time when he comes to wield the whip of power?

Template views on human goodness are of course at one remove from actual behaviour. For example, dishonesty is usually taken as a form of badness. Apparently, ten percent of (Australian?) people are chronically dishonest, and eighty percent are opportunistically dishonest-according to a securities analyst quoted in *The Australian* newspaper's financial pages, April 23, 1997. Is Xúnzǐ right then? It would be intriguing to know whether this was an objective evaluation, based on a fair sample of commercial behaviour, or merely a reflection faith in human evil. It would also be interesting

to know, after several millennia of supposedly religious moral improvement, what component of such honesty is practically influenced by moral exhortations.

In practical daily life, some of us have the dilemma of how to behave with fascists. If one expects the world to work by fairness, or at least according to the rule of law, how does one cope with parties who only respect force, who expect to be blackmailed and find a moral virtue in kicking heads when their chance comes? This is an acute problem because of the disproportionate number of leaders who fall into the fascist (might is right) category. Their survival advantage is the calculation that fairness is weakness. Should one therefore compete according to the rules of the competitor: fairly for the civilized and brutally towards the barbarians?

Whatever the "true" cast of human nature, in a cosmic time scale the species has changed with astonishing speed. There may be hope or despair that perceptions of morality will be part of the evolutionary process. On this scale, further change may well overwhelm all of our philosophies and "eternal truths".

Most people are shocked to learn that almost all of our gene pool is shared with the great apes. It is amazing to find that some very late, minor modifications have so radically separated *homo sapiens* from other animals. We overlook the critical information that the vast bulk of the shared genetic code is apparently discarded junk (is it, actually?). A lesson may be in that. My Chinese and Arabic friends talk airily about five or six thousand years of recorded history. That is a blink in the eye of time. I look in vain for the superior development of their civil societies. It seems that, like the overburden of useless genetic memories, accumulated cultural

practice is a doubtful asset. Our oldest civilizations sink ever closer to barbarism amid the detritus of their ancient inhibitions.

Someone once said that the price of forgetting history was to relive it. They were talking about learning from the mistakes. Sometimes it seems to me that the price of remembering recorded history, or our manufactured recollections of it, is to be forever stricken with illusions of a golden past that somehow justifies a sordid present. Cultural hubris embalms the social pathologies of our forefathers.

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## **21. The Fundamentalist Religious Mind**

There is some preservative drive in human psychology which will collect and classify old ideas with the same enthusiasm that less ambitious folk reserve for collecting old wine bottle labels or stamps. Another familiar corner of the human mind will preserve ideas past their use-by date as signposts to a golden age.

When old ideas were new ideas, they invariably spread across a spectrum encompassing the wise, the timid and the deranged. With the cockeyed hindsight of nostalgia they take the colour of the lens that views them. And if the eye behind the lens is especially humourless, has trouble with play and metaphor, then we are in fundamentalist territory.

Jewish fundamentalists, Islamic fundamentalists, Christian fundamentalists, Hindu fundamentalists, Shinto fundamentalists, Marxist fundamentalists .... all tend to think and act alike. The creed by which they happen to be possessed is merely an accident of time

and circumstance. Their view of the human condition is essentially the same: legalistic, intolerant, and homicidal when it comes to innovation. Innovation was something sanctioned or performed by God in another age. The present age is a kind of purgatory, the waiting room before Armageddon, in which it is too late to change the wall paper. Fundamentalist conservatism of this religious kind is typically built on fear. "God fearing" is the password, extended to fearing authority in general. Authority in this context is required to be fearsome.

The fundamentalist types amongst us are not going to go away. They may be our own children. The challenge for the rest of us is to contain, accommodate and civilize their tendencies in a balanced global community.

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## **22. Easy Beliefs: Can Rationality Survive?**

Seven hundred years ago, when a third of Europe's population was being wiped out by bubonic plague, and the shroud of ignorance was at its most opaque, it must have seemed like a necessary conspiracy for the wise to advertise that at least God knew what it all meant. It must have seemed that there was no other way to keep hordes of illiterate, simple people from destructive panic.

So where are we seven hundred years later? More of us live longer, in less pain, though the net gain in happiness remains unclear. The shadowy demons and monsters whom our forefathers spoke of in whispers are now translated into runaway best-selling films, are good for a bit of a giggle. Their market niche in psychic terror is

displaced by weak men emboldened with new technologies of death: guns, landmines, poison gases and suchlike instruments of cowardice.

Ominously, there are countless millions more of us on the planet than even a century ago. The rational faculty that has hastened our journey here points grimly to a future of mass extermination from overpopulation and a host of derivative causes. Given the known premises, the logic is inexorable, needs telling from no divine voice to a prophet in the wilderness. Yet literacy has not delivered logic to the greater part of humankind. 80% of supposedly educated people can't reset a digital watch. They monkey with the buttons of knowledge, but have neither understanding nor insight. It is basically all as magical to them as the world was to a twelfth century peasant.

When apocalypse makes it to the Sunday papers and the evening news we get that ancient lemming rush to fundamentalist religion. The universities are full of clever twits manufacturing scholastic trivia for this or that clique's bias, but whom, under the layers of data, are as naive as shop assistants about real cause and effect. The media rat pack, starved of imagination, reruns a sort of pornographic movie of manufactured heroes, villains and pompous politicians. The technology that carries it, beyond the ken of chattering journalists and their main readership, is reduced to a "human interest" angle. We have replaced superstitious theology with a superstitious data overload of white noise. Clear thinking is as feared as it ever was.

So whatever happened to the Age of Reason? Maybe it was always a beat up. After all, reason was not invented in the seventeenth century. Reason has been implicit in human behaviour since the day someone lit a fire to cook dinner. The impressive jump has been

from "little reason" - the repertoire of rational personal behaviours that get us a meal and friendship - to the management of "big reason", the understanding and control of complex processes needed to make a polymer, program a million lines of computer code, or run a multinational business.

That is, there *should* have been an important jump in general reasoning skills, but most folk have never quite made it. They remain infinitely clever about small problems of instant gratification, but indifferent to or baffled by larger contexts. Meanwhile, the ruling classes, the power junkies, saw perfectly well what extended reasoning could do for their animal appetites, but remained indifferent, as most of them have always been, to generating just and sustainable human societies.

The clever ones, most of them, grasped the potential of the reasoning process and then, true to form, they fudged it. From Prince Machiavelli to the Jesuits, to Richelieu, to the contemporary clones of so-called management schools, they have learned the art of generating implacable arguments from warped premises. A crowning contemporary perversion by the hijackers of reason is, of course, economic "rationalism", but their fingerprints can be seen on a multitude of activities such as tobacco advertising, mass education, and the military-industrial state.

Between astrological charts and economic rationalism lies a continuum of mis-reason that entangles and engages the energies of all but a small part of the world's population. One morning they will wake up, find the digital controls of civilization on sick leave with a computer virus, and reason from their own loopy ignorance that God has arrived for a brief annihilation ceremony before catching the 4.30pm space drifter to the next universe.

## **23. Is Morality a Parasitic Virus?**

There is an argument that religion is the only suitable vessel for consciously transmitting a culture's values across generations. It is a weak argument. The relationship between religiosity and morality is quite arbitrary. After 2000 years the Christians have not produced a better class of human being. Nor has any other cult. Religious conviction is no index of restraint from crime. On the contrary, for those addicted to the narcotic of power, religion or ideology of any sort is a cloak of hypocrisy which is both irresistible and deadly. It is for this reason perhaps that overtly religious societies tend to become mass prisons of intolerance, proscription and persecution.

Bereft of religious conviction, an agnostic tending to atheism, I'm still a passably decent human being. My maternal grandfather, a Methodist lay village pastor, would have claimed smugly that I am nonetheless a product of Christian values. Well, I have taught Buddhists, Moslems, Hindus, animists and rock worshippers who were also passably decent human beings. Most would claim some superior moral educative role for their religion.

The possibility remains that moral decency is a sort of parasitic psychic virus that can only spread through the medium of religious belief. Since most beings claim a brand of religious belief this is a bit hard to disprove, especially if the argument for the moral inoculation even of atheists in a religiously benign environment is accepted.



I don't accept the virus argument. It seems to me neither provable nor disprovable, which renders it pretty close to inane. Further, it seems redundant.

I pick up all sorts of other information without recourse to religious belief, and some of it has a clear bearing on my moral responses. For example, I observe that certain actions and statements can excite feelings of injustice and even lead to violence. This leads me to conclude that by and large it is not a good idea to kill, rape or steal. I find that compassion is its own reward and that greed cannot be satiated, so is best denied. And so on. Why do we need recourse to the graveyards of religious morality?

It is true that *at the margins*, competing cultures may embrace somewhat different ideas of what is good or bad, decent or indecent, moral or immoral. Yet both between cultures and within cultures we find a statistical bell-curve of acceptability. A "normal", sane, decent person by the standards of most communities will be recognized in almost all other human cultures as "normal", sane and decent. The truth of this is demonstrated by the extraordinary mobility of contemporary peoples, and the relative ease with which hundreds of cultural types have come to live together in countries like Australia.

If competing religions are the well-spring of all this consensus, then you would have to say that at bottom they are getting their message from the same sponsor. You can attribute this commonality to the will of whatever god you wish, or if an agnostic like me, say that it is the natural outcome of shared human biological and environmental configurations.

In my view, religiosity has no positive effect on the aggregate behaviour of populations in matters of ethical, moral or lawful action. In fact, the evidence for this seems overwhelming. Where is the

actual, superior ethical or lawful condition of those communities which proclaim their attachment to this religion or that?

Americans are claimed to be far more religious people on the whole than Australians, but the causes of simple humanity may be much better served in Australia than the United States, if social trust and welfare security are anything to go by (the US has seven times Australia's murder rate). The Islamic posturing of Saudi Arabian and Irani political elites are a dark veil over ghastly, oppressive and hypocritical behaviours, both public and private. The polytheism of Japan or the pantheism of Australian aborigines may fill social and psychological needs, just as monotheism does, but they are equally short on demonstrating the nurturing of a better class of human being.

Whatever human need established religions may have filled, I find little indication that their gradual abandonment has made my own society in Australia a less fulfilling place in which to live a useful life. On the other hand, established religions are often a gross interference in the business of being a decent human being. The central point is worth repeating. The history of every established religion over millennia shows no clear causal link between professed piety and the emergence of better societies. In short, it seems to me that those individuals in any society who are well disposed to peace and decency (in normal times, the majority), and those who are disposed to moral heroism, will continue to express their tendencies well in a secular community. None of this means that individuals in my society or any other will cease to search for spiritual expression.

This little book itself is a quite idiosyncratic spiritual journey. The mass of people will continue to imbibe mass-marketed philosophy as they always have. It is entirely likely that the old religions will be

revisited and reinterpreted long into the future because whatever their transgressions, the public memory of real events is rarely deeper than two generations. The memory of concocted political glories and humiliations is another matter. Once beyond living recall we are back in the hands of myth-makers, testament writers and shamans.

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## **24. Public Religion: a failed experiment that won't roll over**

Public religion as a panacea is a failed experiment. The Buddhists have had 2500 years to prove their case, Hindus even longer; Christians have been promising salvation for 2000 years, and Muslims about 1400 years. They all operate from the premise that a devotee is a better human being than a non-devotee, and that a society of devotees will create a finer culture than a society of non-devotees. The propaganda is impressive, and there is never a lack of worthy model persons to parade as examples to the unwashed. However the supporting cast, the converts in their millions, retain the moral frailty of their infidel cousins.

If life is less nasty, brutish and short than it used to be, the bonus has more to do with penicillin and a 40 hour working week than propitiation of the gods. Much of the evidence of history suggests that when protestations of piety have been loudest, the growth of the human spirit has been most stunted, oppression most vicious, and progress most constrained. Look at the human bonfires of supposed witches in Europe 600 years ago, or decapitations in

Saudi Arabia today. Look at the secular religion of Communism in China, circa 1958, for unsurpassed meanness, and a dogma that could starve thirty million people to death. Look at the routine harassment of women in countries like Pakistan, parading behind the cloak of religious morality.

Given the dismal history of organized religion, you have to ask why each new generation picks up the religious and other ideological precepts of their forefathers. There seem to be a variety of reasons, partly connected with the inertia of cultural institutions, but mainly as a product of flaws in human psychology. Here are what seem to me to be the main rationales for practising a religion:

- 1) Loneliness. Almost all religions offer some sort of community, a regular meeting place, a sanctioned venue for human interaction outside the extended family, an excuse for certain kinds of celebration, and usually nowadays a world-wide network of support in foreign environments. Historically this social network has been the best available, and doubtless many people have put up with the mumbo jumbo for the sake of a little body warmth. Lately however the competition has been getting stiffer.
- 2) Coercion. This has been the traditional way to get converts fast, and there is no extant major religion which has not used it as a short cut to control. The more persistent agents of coercion however are likely to be found within family units and close communities. Going along with the forms of a religion is frequently less damaging to the individual than putting up a spirited resistance.

- 3) Mental frailty. There are those with weak analytic and logical ability in the social/psychological domain; people who are swayed by simple arguments and who lack the wisdom to draw sound lessons from history. Believing that their culture must have an explanation for all things, they will swallow some available magic-god-creation story from authority figures.
  - 4) Delusion. Very large numbers of people choose to willfully delude themselves in many areas of life (e.g. love, career etc), and on the subject of mortality, mostly (I suspect) out of fear of taking responsibility for their own life and death.
  - 5) Opportunism. There are those who use religion as an instrument of power for social or political advantage. The level of conscious hypocrisy in this game varies in kind and degree, from self-righteous citizens, to would-be saints, to pompous church deacons, to the princes of the church. Nevertheless, all of them find the magic incantations of their dogma to be a superb instrument for manipulating other human beings, and this intoxicates them with power, often to the point of hubris.
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## **25. An Impotent God versus the God Zombies**

In a world of omnipotent deity, God was/is the great pilot in the sky who radio-controls all living things. Living beings are dumb terminals, automatons without final responsibility. Even today, "the will of God" is still tried on as a legal defence. Satan presumably

runs a rival radio frequency and can re-tune your receiver under certain conditions. I interact with a surprising number of people who continue to see themselves as such diminished agents. I find them mostly pitiful, but potentially dangerous in zombie mode. Luckily, a good deal of the time they forget to turn on the supernatural brain receiver and are able to act like sensible human beings.

God zombies are dangerous because:

- a) believing the world to be populated by other zombies rather than incredibly complex, unique, wonderful and responsible beings, they must have far less compunction about killing those who appear to be rogue escapees from the Master's voice;
- b) being mere zombies, they feel must feel little personal responsibility for the destruction, deception or betrayal of those not obeying their Master's supposed will.
- c) you can never be quite sure what desperate command a God zombie is suddenly going to receive from head office.

The one redeeming feature of God zombies is that they usually have a rule book which strictly states the conditions under which they are allowed to kill, lie or rape. Like all the creations of symbolic language however, such rule books are open to a reinterpretation of symbols, usually to suit the political moment.

Back in the universe where I live, religion is an attempt to extend the bounds of reality within which an individual makes decisions. In this sense supernatural phenomena merely add to the controls on a decision in the same way as rituals such as not eating meat. However this extended reality must also coexist with every earthly condition, such as the need to make a living, coercion by family and officials and so on. An individual makes choices with reference to

the total smorgasbord, and the relative weighting of imperatives, whether local or supernatural, can shift constantly.

You could say that a medieval Englishman gave much greater conscious weight to the coercive power of the divine over the coercive power of the secular than his contemporary does, even though both "believed" in the supernatural. The fact is that most contemporary religious believers give so little weight to the supernatural in their pragmatic assessment of reality when making choices that their actual behaviour is hardly different from that of an atheist.

My own observation of those who claim to be heavily influenced by religion is that their actual moral choices are still only (very) marginally influenced by the religious "reality", but still dominated by the trade off between their own appetites and personalities on the one hand, and their interpretation of whatever worldly "reality" is bearing down on them on the other. What does happen with the pious is that favourable moral choices are attributed to a religious condition, and unfavourable choices to "evil" forces. This *post hoc* attribution is a mental construct which serves to validate the religious structure, but has little true bearing on what would prevail anyway without its presence.

Although real human actions may be only marginally coded by religion in daily living, the rationales attached to those actions are another matter. When it comes to reflection, ideologies and religions make false claims to be mirrors held up to our souls, if soul is the sum of inner tendencies. The finer the sentiments each religion whispers in our ears, the brighter that inner mirror seems to shine, catching reflections in every accidental act of living. Yet being mirrors, possessing no radiant power of judgement or creation,

religions and ideologies magnify the petty, the vindictive and vengeful in us, as well as the luminous, generous and warm.

The priests and shamans of each orthodoxy have the clarity of these polished reflections coded on their tongues. Coolly they take now this fragment of a reflected idea, now that one, as the premise to their amoral opportunism of the moment. Skillfully they attach old dogmas to our daily needs and acts. Rational within the bounds of each task, they are indiscriminate in choosing the foundation of argument, and indifferent to the execution of its victims.

The one thing which is anathema to these Platonic fixers, these Jesuitical conspirators, is that erratic brilliance which we find in the truly creative mind. The mechanic who makes a better mouse trap is clapped on the shoulder for being practical, but woe betide him if he is literate enough to enunciate a revolutionary principle underlying his invention.

Luckily, in many places at present mechanics or even scientists are thought more valuable and more reliable than priests from the old religions. This need not be mourned. While priests are humble enough to live on charity and the loneliness of old ladies we are probably fairly safe. Alas, new shamans have arisen in their place, well-fed tricksters in dark suits and white shirts who flourish scrolls of economic babble and call themselves consultants or managers. Their new god is greed - probably some incarnation of Satan in the old language - and although his breath is perilous, his agents are easily swayed and subverted by the moment with competing bribes. Being a rabble, the economic shamans are hard to slay in single, heroic battles, but they are vulnerable to well-directed guerrilla attack.



If significant numbers of people out there in the wide world do indeed feel themselves to be autonomous and responsible beings, then the god of omnipotence is dead. Omnipotent deity cannot coexist with even partially autonomous men and women. One senses that the largest number of contemporary humans have made an implicit decision about this. Maybe the achievements of rational science have armed us with a certain hubris. In any case, in my neighbourhood the deity has shed complete authority, and having surrendered a little, will for many folk diminish to the stature of a garden god.

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## **26. Religious Managers: feminine dialectic and camp power-play**

Self-preservation is a curious thing. Chaps have their biceps, while young rascals have reckless enthusiasm. Little girls have the superb natural protection of being cute. Bigger girls trade on the power of sex, and ladies of a certain age radiate loving kindness and maternal concern as they arrange to have you pushed down a stairwell; (a hefty percentage of my employment managers have been women, so I know all about the uses and abuses of power in this constituency).

What strikes me as intriguing are parallels with secular structure to be found in the management of organized religions. Organized religions are ancient and socially embedded vehicles for the promotion of power, normally dominant male power, or very occasionally, feminine power. This unstated but pervasive gender

power role may be a prime reason for their survival. The body warmth of shared prejudice is addictive. Anyway, it seems likely that where a sect does tend to gender equality, its days are numbered. The whole thing dies of apathy and arguments about who has to wash up the dishes.

Given the mundane egotism of real priestly behaviour, it is fascinating that religious discourse is always promoted in the name of compassion, forgiveness, love and other such trinkets. In other words it deploys the verbal armoury of feminine seduction to achieve power in precisely the same way as your average feminine corporate manager, real estate saleswoman or debutante.

The difference is that typical religious discourse is conducted by a collection of querulous, righteous males with the covert goal of preserving dispensations for their social position. For a long time I've wondered vaguely at the absurdity of shamanistic posturing. Now I can put my finger on it: the whole performance is a kind of high camp parody of standard male advice to lay back and enjoy the assault. So folks, atone for your sins and pass the altar wine, while doctor Strangelove e-mails God for you in the special language of Eternity.

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## **27. Religious Uses and Misuses: learning to live with the whole damned thing**

Religion at its best is a vehicle for community. It creates a set of rules and values within which people may direct their thoughts, their behaviour and their plans. It sets the ground rules to feed and

breed by. It provides a reason and usually a venue for ritual, for celebration, and most of all, for groups of people from every walk of life to come together for fellowship. These are the undeniable benefits of religion and the real source of its durability. The trouble is, the storylines sustaining known religions are becoming less and less credible to more and more people. Also, the debit side of the ledger in social costs is becoming too burdensome to ignore.

Take the problem of storylines. Most established religions claim to be a gateway to unseen, supernatural, controlling forces. These forces are normally reified as a god or gods. Religions claim through their theology to explain the beginnings and the ends of life, and usually they claim to give each individual a unique, enduring position in the life cycle. Often nowadays they claim to offer each individual a personal telephone line to God, with a promise of special treatment in return for certain kinds of behaviour.

No religion offers a standard scientific proof which is based on credible premises for its supernatural doctrine. Rational personality types go for rigorous proofs sourced in *a priori* premises which they find self evident and cannot therefore believe that others remain unimpressed. For the more mystically inclined, proof is said to come from personal revelation, or the reputed revelation of prophets. That is, there are claims to a special audience with an unseen god, and the intervention of miracles. Doctrine is usually written in a book, and the book itself is said to have magical properties (an idea stemming from the time when most people were illiterate).

All such theological argument is, in my judgment, utter humbug. One man's religion is another man's superstition. What religious dogmas have in common is the confidence trickery of a snake-oil medicine peddler, and the exploitation of fear, ignorance and cupidity. Well, there have always been characters who think like me.

Once they got banished, or burnt on bonfires. Unfortunately for the shamans, much of my view has now become the default opinion amongst huge numbers of literate people.

Mass cynicism is not good news either for those who purvey religion as a path to power. Conventional religion at the deepest psychological level is often about power and control.

Between human and god, this is a matter of exerting some control over destiny by placing power in the hands of a beneficent god. It is a way of denying the death of the individual, that is, of one's own imminent death. Such a contract between one man and an imaginary god could be thought psychotic (and every mental asylum contains individuals who claim to be God, or his special agent).

Instead, established religion becomes the conspiracy of a whole society to mitigate its fear by living a lie, the lie that some God has revealed itself to many people. Those who deny this lie are treated as psychotic and dangerous.

In the domain of social behaviour, religion is also, inevitably, about power and control. Its hold on whole communities has made it an irresistible instrument for personal gain by all those who hunger for political power.

The lust for power and control over others operates at every level in most societies, from the family to the priesthood to the state. Thus religion has historically been the most potent of all vehicles for intolerance, persecution, oppression and fascism. It is the implacable enemy of innovation. Religion corrupted to the ends of power - and sooner or later almost every religion is used in this way - becomes an evil human institution.

So what is to be done? Marx may have been right that religion is the opium of the masses. If so, the withdrawal symptoms have been too much for most societies to tolerate. Certainly communism, which shared many of conventional religion's worst properties, proved to be no substitute in the end.

We might suppose that competition for time and attention in the age of mass media would lead to an attrition of religion's hold. It hasn't always worked out that way. Other cultural ingredients affect the outcomes.

The re-mythologizing of Hindu epics in television series has led to a resurgence of Hindu fundamentalism in India. The United States remains fertile ground for religions of all kinds, and no President would dare claim to be an atheist. The Japanese, on the other hand, retain a sort of limited spirituality with thousands of Shinto gods which fill an emotional need in their special narrow domains, but are not allowed to interfere with life in general, while general rules of behaviour are set by non-theistic Buddhist philosophy. Perhaps that is a good argument for polytheism.

The vast majority of British people (82% apparently) have given up on organized religion altogether, and a healthy percentage of Australians have gone the same way.

Some religious dogmas seem to be easier to misuse than others. The claimed omnipotence of monotheistic gods (e.g. in Judaic religions) appears to give them a special potency for oppression. This is particularly true where dominant males identify with the God-figure, as they often do, and oppress women.

Religions which define community by rigidly excluding outsiders (by birth, marriage, race or whatever) can be both virulent in the hands

of the power-hungry, or alternatively, mark their own kind for extinction when it is a minority in a dominant other culture.

Rewriting out-dated creed has been a major industry for centuries, but doesn't really seem to have improved the product for any major religion. Dogma which contains any ambiguity whatsoever will be misinterpreted to suit the political ends of the ambitious, the hopeful or the cowardly (and there we have covered most of humankind).

There is no safety in a liturgy which says at one point that "the meek shall inherit the earth" (a promise of power anyway), while at another point offering parables about enemies who are stigmatized as sub-human or not "chosen" by God.

What a dilemma. Religion won't go away. It satisfies definite needs. Yet its realization magnifies the very worst, as well as the best, that humanity is capable of. We must have a religion, you say. Well, if we must have a religion, then let us keep it flexible, humane and practical.

The sensible use of reflective activities like meditation can be taught non-dogmatically, on the same plane as other self-management techniques. There is no value and much danger in making simplistic claims about supposedly supernatural forces. As Buddhism shows, God can be kept out of the exercise altogether.

We can be responsible for the care of humanity, living creatures and the planet earth. Let us be specific about the ethics of power and control. We could say, for example, that any human being has the right to strive for that amount of power, no more and no less, which will permit him or her to maintain the personal integrity of his choices about what to say, what to do, whom to associate with and how to earn a living.

Any political state (while states remain) shall have the right to seek that amount of autonomy, no more and no less, which will permit its citizens to satisfy the conditions of personal autonomy just described. But let us direct the main focus of this newly incarnated religion away from power and control altogether.

As to myself, I march to a different drum. Probably no mass movement will ever capture me. I strive for well-being, for myself and others, and I strive for competence. I treasure humour, and try not to take myself or anyone else too seriously, for this is the best way to keep balance and a sense of proportion. It seems to me that a person who is healthy in body and mind, a member of a well-functioning community, and who is good at what he or she chooses to do, will obtain the very best of rewards which life has to offer. My "religion" then, is the pursuit of well-being and competence, and its vision, its name if you like, I call Serendipity

END

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## **About The Author**

Thor May is an undistinguished person. He can't remember the last time he successfully seduced a woman, won a pub raffle or got an offer that he couldn't refuse within thirty nanoseconds. He has a genius for failing job interviews, but has somehow stumbled in and out of many jobs. His expertise includes picking the chewing gum off pub carpets and teaching grammar to people who don't want to know about it.

He started then gave up two doctorates, before finally scratching another one over the finish line at the absurd age of 64. He has started to learn then more or less forgotten a clutch of languages, and started, then lost track of whatever a career was. At sixty-seven (2013) he is seriously deciding what to do when he grows up.

At the moment, the author is trying out being the new messiah. This began when he walked into the biggest book shop in town and couldn't find a section for agnostics. There were sections for tarot card readers, economists, and computer networkers. There was even a corner for Christians, Muslims and Buddhists. But not a whisper about agnostics. He thought he was agnostic, or even occasionally an atheist in a vague sort of a way. He reckoned that when most punters weren't watching football they were probably being vaguely vague like him. It smelled like a market opening.

So the author got down to writing his smash hit on agnosticism. Alack, he suffered the kind of debilitating attack of honesty that has kept him irrelevant for half a century. His slim volume won't cure your warts, or give you honorary membership of a master race. However, you are guaranteed at least one idea to disagree with,



and the right to make as many anagrams as you like from the name of god.

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**Professional bio:** Thor May's PhD dissertation, *Language Tangle*, dealt with language teaching productivity. Thor has been teaching English to non-native speakers, training teachers and lecturing linguistics, since 1976. This work has taken him to seven countries in Oceania and East Asia, mostly with tertiary students, but with a couple of detours to teach secondary students and young children. He has trained teachers in Australia, Fiji and South Korea. In an earlier life, prior to becoming a teacher, he had a decade of drifting through unskilled jobs in Australia, New Zealand and finally England (after backpacking across Asia in 1972).