

that faith itself is a virtue. Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument. Teaching children that unquestioned faith is a virtue primes them – given certain other ingredients that are not hard to come by – to grow up into potentially lethal weapons for future jihads or crusades. Immunized against fear by the promise of a martyr's paradise, the authentic faith-head deserves a high place in the history of armaments, alongside the longbow, the warhorse, the tank and the cluster bomb. If children were taught to question and think through their beliefs, instead of being taught the superior virtue of faith without question, it is a good bet that there would be no suicide bombers. Suicide bombers do what they do because they really believe what they were taught in their religious schools: that duty to God exceeds all other priorities, and that martyrdom in his service will be rewarded in the gardens of Paradise. And they were taught *that* lesson not necessarily by extremist fanatics but by decent, gentle, mainstream religious instructors, who lined them up in their madrasas, sitting in rows, rhythmically nodding their innocent little heads up and down while they learned every word of the holy book like demented parrots. Faith can be very very dangerous, and deliberately to implant it into the vulnerable mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong. It is to childhood itself, and the violation of childhood by religion, that we turn in the next chapter.

Richard Dawkins The God Delusion
(London: Bantam Press, 2006)

CHAPTER 9

Childhood, abuse and the escape from religion

*There is in every village a torch – the teacher:
and an extinguisher – the clergyman.*

VICTOR HUGO

I begin with an anecdote of nineteenth-century Italy. I am not implying that anything like this awful story could happen today. But the attitudes of mind that it betrays are lamentably current, even though the practical details are not. This nineteenth-century human tragedy sheds a pitiless light on present-day religious attitudes to children.

In 1858 Edgardo Mortara, a six-year-old child of Jewish parents living in Bologna, was legally seized by the papal police acting under orders from the Inquisition. Edgardo was forcibly dragged away from his weeping mother and distraught father to the Catechumens (house for the conversion of Jews and Muslims) in Rome, and thereafter brought up as a Roman Catholic. Aside from occasional brief visits under close priestly supervision, his parents never saw him again. The story is told by David I. Kertzer in his remarkable book, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*.

Edgardo's story was by no means unusual in Italy at the time, and the reason for these priestly abductions was always the same. In every case, the child had been secretly baptized at some earlier date, usually by a Catholic nursemaid, and the Inquisition later came to hear of the baptism. It was a central part of the Roman Catholic belief-system that, once a child had been baptized, however informally and clandestinely, that child was irrevocably transformed into a Christian. In their mental world, to allow a 'Christian child' to stay with his Jewish parents was not an option, and they maintained this bizarre and cruel stance steadfastly, and with the utmost sincerity, in the face of worldwide outrage. That widespread outrage, by the way, was dismissed by the Catholic newspaper *Civiltà Cattolica* as due to the international power of rich Jews — sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Apart from the publicity it aroused, Edgardo Mortara's history was entirely typical of many others. He had once been looked after by Anna Morisi, an illiterate Catholic girl who was then fourteen. He fell ill and she panicked lest he might die. Brought up in a stupor of belief that a child who died unbaptized would suffer forever in hell, she asked advice from a Catholic neighbour who told her how to do a baptism. She went back into the house, threw some water from a bucket on little Edgardo's head and said, 'I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.' And

that was it. From that moment on, Edgardo was legally a Christian. When the priests of the Inquisition learned of the incident years later, they acted promptly and decisively, giving no thought to the sorrowful consequences of their action.

Amazingly for a rite that could have such monumental significance for a whole extended family, the Catholic Church allowed (and still allows) anybody to baptize anybody else. The baptizer doesn't have to be a priest. Neither the child, nor the parents, nor anybody else has to consent to the baptism. Nothing need be signed. Nothing need be officially witnessed. All that is necessary is a splash of water, a few words, a helpless child, and a superstitious and catechistically brainwashed babysitter. Actually, only the last of these is needed because, assuming the child is too young to be a witness, who is even to know? An American colleague who was brought up Catholic writes to me as follows: 'We used to baptize our dolls. I don't remember any of us baptizing our little Protestant friends but no doubt that has happened and happens today. We made little Catholics of our dolls, taking them to church, giving them Holy Communion etc. We were brainwashed to be good Catholic mothers early on.'

If nineteenth-century girls were anything like my modern correspondent, it is surprising that cases like Edgardo Mortara's were not more common than they were. As it was, such stories were distressingly frequent in nineteenth-century Italy, which leaves one asking the obvious question. Why did the Jews of the Papal States employ Catholic servants at all, given the appalling risk that could flow from doing so? Why didn't they take good care to engage Jewish servants? The answer, yet again, has nothing to do with sense and everything to do with religion. The Jews needed servants whose religion didn't forbid them to work on the sabbath. A Jewish maid could indeed be relied upon not to baptize your child into a spiritual orphanage. But she couldn't light the fire or clean the house on a Saturday. This was why, of the Bolognese Jewish families at the time who could afford servants, most hired Catholics.

In this book, I have deliberately refrained from detailing the horrors of the Crusades, the *conquistadoras* or the Spanish Inquisition. Cruel and evil people can be found in every century and of every persuasion. But this story of the Italian Inquisition and its

attitude to children is particularly revealing of the religious mind, and the evils that arise specifically *because* it is religious. First is the remarkable perception by the religious mind that a sprinkle of water and a brief verbal incantation can totally change a child's life, taking precedence over parental consent, the child's own consent, the child's own happiness and psychological well-being. . . . over everything that ordinary common sense and human feeling would see as important. Cardinal Antonelli spelled it out at the time in a letter to Lionel Rothschild, Britain's first Jewish Member of Parliament, who had written to protest about Edgardo's abduction. The cardinal replied that he was powerless to intervene, and added, 'Here it may be opportune to observe that, if the voice of nature is powerful, even more powerful are the sacred duties of religion.' Yes, well, that just about says it all, doesn't it?

Second is the extraordinary fact that the priests, cardinals and Pope seem genuinely not to have understood what a terrible thing they were doing to poor Edgardo Mortara. It passes all sensible understanding, but they sincerely believed they were doing him a good turn by taking him away from his parents and giving him a Christian upbringing. They felt a duty of *protection!* A Catholic newspaper in the United States defended the Pope's stance on the Mortara case, arguing that it was unthinkable that a Christian government 'could leave a Christian child to be brought up by a Jew' and invoking the principle of religious liberty, 'the liberty of a child to be a Christian and not forced compulsorily to be a Jew. . . . The Holy Father's protection of the child, in the face of all the ferocious fanaticism of infidelity and bigotry, is the grandest moral spectacle which the world has seen for ages.' Has there ever been a more flagrant misdirection of words like 'forced', 'compulsorily', 'ferocious', 'fanaticism' and 'bigotry'? Yet all the indications are that Catholic apologists, from the Pope down, sincerely believed that what they were doing was right: absolutely right morally, and right for the welfare of the child. Such is the power of (mainstream, 'moderate') religion to warp judgement and pervert ordinary human decency. The newspaper *Il Cattolico* was frankly bewildered at the widespread failure to see what a magnanimous favour the Church had done Edgardo Mortara when it rescued him from his Jewish family:

Whoever among us gives a little serious thought to the matter, compares the condition of a Jew – without a true Church, without a King, and without a country, dispersed and always a foreigner wherever he lives on the face of the earth, and moreover, infamous for the ugly stain with which the killers of Christ are marked . . . will immediately understand how great is this temporal advantage that the Pope is obtaining for the Mortara boy.

Third is the presumptuousness whereby religious people *know*, without evidence, that the faith of their birth is the one true faith, all others being aberrations or downright false. The above quotations give vivid examples of this attitude on the Christian side. It would be grossly unjust to equate the two sides in this case, but this is as good a place as any to note that the Mortaras could at a stroke have had Edgardo back, if only they had accepted the priests' entreaties and agreed to be baptized themselves. Edgardo had been stolen in the first place because of a splash of water and a dozen meaningless words. Such is the fatuousness of the religiously indoctrinated mind, another pair of splashes is all it would have taken to reverse the process. To some of us, the parents' refusal indicates wanton stubbornness. To others, their principled stand elevates them into the long list of martyrs for all religions down the ages.

'Be of good comfort Master Ridley and play the man: we shall this day by God's grace light such a candle in England, as I trust shall never be put out.' No doubt there are causes for which to die is noble. But how could the martyrs Ridley, Latimer and Crammer let themselves be burned rather than forsake their Protestant Little-Endianism in favour of Catholic Big-Endianism – does it really matter all that much from which end you open a boiled egg? Such is the stubborn – or admirable, if that is your view – conviction of the religious mind, that the Mortaras could not bring themselves to seize the opportunity offered by the meaningless rite of baptism. Couldn't they cross their fingers, or whisper 'not' under their breath while being baptized? No, they couldn't, because they had been brought up in a (moderate) religion, and therefore took the whole ridiculous charade seriously. As for me, I think only of poor little

Edgardo – unwittingly born into a world dominated by the religious mind, hapless in the crossfire, all but orphaned in an act of well-meaning but, to a young child, shattering cruelty.

Fourth, to pursue the same theme, is the assumption that a six-year-old child can properly be said to have a religion at all, whether it is Jewish or Christian or anything else. To put it another way, the idea that baptizing an unknowing, uncomprehending child can change him from one religion to another at a stroke seems absurd – but it is surely not more absurd than labelling a tiny child as belonging to any particular religion in the first place. What mattered to Edgardo was not 'his' religion (he was too young to possess thought-out religious opinions) but the love and care of his parents and family, and he was deprived of those by celibate priests whose grotesque cruelty was mitigated only by their crass insensitivity to normal human feelings – an insensitivity that comes all too easily to a mind hijacked by religious faith.

Even without physical abduction, isn't it always a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have thought about? Yet the practice persists to this day, almost entirely unquestioned. To question it is my main purpose in this chapter.

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ABUSE

Priestly abuse of children is nowadays taken to mean sexual abuse, and I feel obliged, at the outset, to get the whole matter of sexual abuse into proportion and out of the way. Others have noted that we live in a time of hysteria about pedophilia, a mob psychology that calls to mind the Salem witch-hunts of 1692. In July 2000 the *News of the World*, widely acclaimed in the face of stiff competition as Britain's most disgusting newspaper, organized a 'name and shame' campaign, barely stopping short of inciting vigilantes to take direct violent action against pedophiles. The house of a hospital paediatrician was attacked by zealots unacquainted with the difference between a paediatrician and a pedophile.¹³⁶ The mob hysteria over pedophiles has reached epidemic proportions and

driven parents to panic. Today's Just Williams, today's Huck Finns, today's Swallows and Amazons are deprived of the freedom to roam that was one of the delights of childhood in earlier times (when the actual, as opposed to perceived, risk of molestation was probably no less).

In fairness to the *News of the World*, at the time of its campaign passions had been aroused by a truly horrifying murder, sexually motivated, of an eight-year-old girl kidnapped in Sussex. Nevertheless, it is clearly unjust to visit upon all pedophiles a vengeance appropriate to the tiny minority who are also murderers. All three of the boarding schools I attended employed teachers whose affection for small boys overstepped the bounds of propriety. That was indeed reprehensible. Nevertheless if, fifty years on, they had been hounded by vigilantes or lawyers as no better than child murderers, I should have felt obliged to come to their defence, even as the victim of one of them (an embarrassing but otherwise harmless experience).

The Roman Catholic Church has borne a heavy share of such retrospective opprobrium. For all sorts of reasons I dislike the Roman Catholic Church. But I dislike unfairness even more, and I can't help wondering whether this one institution has been unfairly demonized over the issue, especially in Ireland and America. I suppose some additional public resentment flows from the hypocrisy of priests whose professional life is largely devoted to arousing guilt about 'sin'. Then there is the abuse of trust by a figure in authority, whom the child has been trained from the cradle to revere. Such additional resentments should make us all the more careful not to rush to judgement. We should be aware of the remarkable power of the mind to concoct false memories, especially when abetted by unscrupulous therapists and mercenary lawyers. The psychologist Elizabeth Loftus has shown great courage, in the face of spiteful vested interests, in demonstrating how easy it is for people to concoct memories that are entirely false but which seem, to the victim, every bit as real as true memories.¹³⁷ This is so counter-intuitive that juries are easily swayed by sincere but false testimony from witnesses.

In the particular case of Ireland, even without the sexual abuse, the brutality of the Christian Brothers,¹³⁸ responsible for the

education of a significant proportion of the male population of the country, is legendary. And the same could be said of the often sadistically cruel nuns who ran many of Ireland's girls' schools. The infamous Magdalene Asylums, subject of Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters*, continued in existence until as late as 1996. Forty years on, it is harder to get redress for floggings than for sexual fondlings, and there is no shortage of lawyers actively soliciting custom from victims who might not otherwise have raked over the distant past. There's gold in them that long-gone fumbles in the vestry – some of them, indeed, so long gone that the alleged offender is likely to be dead and unable to present his side of the story. The Catholic Church worldwide has paid out more than a billion dollars in compensation.¹³⁹ You might almost sympathize with them, until you remember where their money came from in the first place.

Once, in the question time after a lecture in Dublin, I was asked what I thought about the widely publicized cases of sexual abuse by Catholic priests in Ireland. I replied that, horrible as sexual abuse no doubt was, the damage was arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by bringing the child up Catholic in the first place. It was an off-the-cuff remark made in the heat of the moment, and I was surprised that it earned a round of enthusiastic applause from that Irish audience (composed, admittedly, of Dublin intellectuals and presumably not representative of the country at large). But I was reminded of the incident later when I received a letter from an American woman in her forties who had been brought up Roman Catholic. At the age of seven, she told me, two unpleasant things had happened to her. She was sexually abused by her parish priest in his car. And, around the same time, a little schoolfriend of hers, who had tragically died, went to hell because she was a Protestant. Or so my correspondent had been led to believe by the then official doctrine of her parents' church. Her view as a mature adult was that, of these two examples of Roman Catholic child abuse, the one physical and the other mental, the second was by far the worst. She wrote:

Being fondled by the priest simply left the impression (from the mind of a 7 year old) as 'yucky' while the

memory of my friend going to hell was one of cold, immeasurable fear. I never lost sleep because of the priest – but I spent many a night being terrified that the people I loved would go to Hell. It gave me nightmares.

Admittedly, the sexual fondling she suffered in the priest's car was relatively mild compared with, say, the pain and disgust of a sodomized altar boy. And nowadays the Catholic Church is said not to make so much of hell as it once did. But the example shows that it is at least possible for psychological abuse of children to out-class physical. It is said that Alfred Hitchcock, the great cinematic specialist in the art of frightening people, was once driving through Switzerland when he suddenly pointed out of the car window and said, 'That is the most frightening sight I have ever seen.' It was a priest in conversation with a little boy, his hand on the boy's shoulder. Hitchcock leaned out of the car window and shouted, 'Run, little boy! Run for your life!'

'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.' The adage is true as long as you don't really *believe* the words. But if your whole upbringing, and everything you have ever been told by parents, teachers and priests, has led you to believe, *really believe*, utterly and completely, that sinners burn in hell (or some other obnoxious article of doctrine such as that a woman is the property of her husband), it is entirely plausible that words could have a more long-lasting and damaging effect than deeds. I am persuaded that the phrase 'child abuse' is no exaggeration when used to describe what teachers and priests are doing to children whom they encourage to believe in something like the punishment of unshriven mortal sins in an eternal hell.

In the television documentary *Root of All Evil?* to which I have already referred, I interviewed a number of religious leaders and was criticized for picking on American extremists rather than respectable mainstreamers like archbishops.* It sounds like a fair criticism – except that, in early 21st-century America, what *seems*

* The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster and the Chief Rabbi of Britain were all invited to be interviewed by me. All declined, doubtless for good reasons. The Bishop of Oxford agreed, and he was as delightful, and as far from being extremist, as they surely would have been.

extreme to the outside world is actually mainstream. One of my interviewees who most appalled the British television audience, for example, was Pastor Ted Haggard of Colorado Springs. But, far from being extreme in Bush's America, 'Pastor Ted' is president of the thirty-million-strong National Association of Evangelicals, and he claims to be favoured with a telephone consultation with President Bush every Monday. If I had wanted to interview real extremists by modern American standards, I'd have gone for 'Reconstructionists' whose 'Dominion Theology' openly advocates a Christian theocracy in America. As a concerned American colleague writes to me:

Europeans need to know there is a traveling theo-freak show which actually advocates reinstatement of Old Testament law – killing of homosexuals etc. – and the right to hold office, or even to vote, for Christians only. Middle class crowds cheer to this rhetoric. If secularists are not vigilant, Dominionists and Reconstructionists will soon be mainstream in a true American theocracy.*

Another of my television interviewees was Pastor Keenan Roberts, from the same state of Colorado as Pastor Ted. Pastor Roberts's particular brand of nuttiness takes the form of what he calls Hell Houses. A Hell House is a place where children are brought, by their parents or their Christian schools, to be scared witless over what might happen to them after they die. Actors play out fearsome tableaux of particular 'sins' like abortion and homosexuality, with a scarlet-clad devil in glowing attendance. These are a prelude to the *pièce de résistance*, Hell Itself, complete

* The following seems to be real, although I at first suspected a satirical hoax by *The Onion*: www.talk2action.org/story/2006/5/29/195855/939. It is a computer game called *Left Behind: Eternal Forces*. P. Z. Myers sums it up on his excellent Pharyngula website. Imagine: you are a foot soldier in a paramilitary group whose purpose is to remake America as a Christian theocracy and establish its worldly vision of the dominion of Christ over all aspects of life. . . . You are on a mission – both a religious mission and a military mission – to convert or kill Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, gays, and anyone who advocates the separation of church and state. . . .? See http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2006/05/gta-meet_the_f.php; for a review, see <http://select.nytimes.com/gsv/abstract.html?res=F1071FFD3C550C718CDDAA0894DE404482>.

with realistic sulphurous smell of burning brimstone and the agonized screams of the forever damned.

After watching a rehearsal, in which the devil was suitably diabolical in the hammed-up style of a villain of Victorian melodrama, I interviewed Pastor Roberts in the presence of his cast. He told me that the optimum age for a child to visit a Hell House is twelve. This shocked me somewhat, and I asked him whether it would worry him if a twelve-year-old child had nightmares after one of his performances. He replied, presumably honestly:

I would rather for them to understand that Hell is a place that they absolutely do not want to go. I would rather reach them with that message at twelve than to not reach them with that message and have them live a life of sin and to never find the Lord Jesus Christ. And if they end up having nightmares, as a result of experiencing this, I think there's a higher good that would ultimately be achieved and accomplished in their life than simply having nightmares.

I suppose that, if you really and truly believed what Pastor Roberts says he believes, you would feel it right to intimidate children too.

We cannot write off Pastor Roberts as an extremist wingnut. Like Ted Haggard, he is mainstream in today's America. I'd be surprised if even they would buy into the belief of some of their co-religionists that you can hear the screams of the damned if you listen in on volcanoes,¹⁴⁰ and that the giant tube worms found in hot deep-ocean vents are fulfillments of Mark 9: 43-4: 'And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.' Whatever they believe hell is actually like, all these hell-fire enthusiasts seem to share the glowing *Schadenfreude* and complacency of those who know they are among the saved, well conveyed by that foremost among theologians, St Thomas Aquinas, in *Summa Theologica*: 'That the saints may enjoy their beatitude and the grace of God more abundantly they are permitted

to see the punishment of the damned in hell.' Nice man.*

The fear of hell-fire can be very real, even among otherwise rational people. After my television documentary on religion, among the many letters I received was this, from an obviously bright and honest woman:

I went to a Catholic school from the age of five, and was indoctrinated by nuns who wielded straps, sticks and canes. During my teens I read Darwin, and what he said about evolution made such a lot of sense to the logical part of my mind. However, I've gone through life suffering much conflict and a deep down fear of hell fire which gets triggered quite frequently. I've had some psychotherapy which has enabled me to work through some of my earlier problems but can't seem to overcome this deep fear.

So, the reason I'm writing to you is would you send me please the name and address of the therapist you interviewed on this week's programme who deals with this particular fear.

I was moved by her letter, and (suppressing a momentary and ignoble regret that there is no hell for those nuns to go to) replied that she should trust in her reason as a great gift which she – unlike less fortunate people – obviously possessed. I suggested that the extreme horribleness of hell, as portrayed by priests and nuns, is inflated to compensate for its implausibility. If hell were plausible, it would only have to be moderately unpleasant in order to deter. Given that it is so unlikely to be true, it has to be advertised as very very scary indeed, to balance its implausibility and retain some deterrence value. I also put her in touch with the therapist she mentioned, Jill Myrton, a delightful and deeply sincere woman whom I had interviewed on camera. Jill had herself been raised in a more than usually odious sect called the Exclusive Brethren: so unpleasant that there is even a website, www.peets.net, entirely devoted to caring for those who have escaped from it.

Jill Myrton herself had been brought up to be terrified of hell, had escaped from Christianity as an adult, and now counsels and

* Compare Ann Coulter's charming Christian charity: 'I defy any of my co-religionists to tell me they do not laugh at the idea of Dawkins burning in hell' (Coulter 2006: 268).

helps others similarly traumatized in childhood: 'If I think back to my childhood, it's one dominated by fear. And it was the fear of disapproval while in the present, but also of eternal damnation. And for a child, images of hell-fire and gnashing of teeth are actually very real. They are not metaphorical at all.' I then asked her to spell out what she had actually been told about hell, as a child, and her eventual reply was as moving as her expressive face during the long hesitation before she answered: 'It's strange, isn't it? After all this time it still has the power to . . . affect me . . . when you . . . when you ask me that question. Hell is a fearful place. It's complete rejection by God. It's complete judgement, there is real fire, there is real torment, real torture, and it goes on for ever so there is no respite from it.'

She went on to tell me of the support group she runs for escapees from a childhood similar to her own, and she dwelt on how difficult it is for many of them to leave: 'The process of leaving is extraordinarily difficult. Ah, you are leaving behind a whole social network, a whole system that you've practically been brought up in, you are leaving behind a belief-system that you have held for years. Very often you leave families and friends. . . . You don't really exist any more for them.' I was able to chime in with my own experience of letters from people in America saying they have read my books and have given up their religion as a consequence. Disconcertingly many go on to say that they haven't tell their families, or that they have told their families with terrible results. The following is typical. The writer is a young American medical student.

I felt the urge to write you an email because I share your view on religion, a view that is, as I'm sure you're aware, isolating in America. I grew up in a Christian family and even though the idea of religion never sat well with me I only recently got up the nerve to tell someone. That someone was my girlfriend who was . . . horrified. I realize that a declaration of atheism could be shocking but now it's as if she views me as a completely different person. She can't trust me, she says, because my morals don't come from God. I don't know if we'll get past this, and I don't

particularly want to share my belief with other people who are close to me because I fear the same reaction of distaste . . . I don't expect a response. I only write to you because I hoped you'd sympathize and share in my frustration. Imagine losing someone you loved, and who loved you, on the basis of religion. Aside from her view that I'm now a Godless heathen we were perfect for each other. It reminds me of your observation that people do insane things in the name of their faith. Thanks for listening.

I replied to this unfortunate young man, pointing out to him that, while his girlfriend had discovered something about him, he too had discovered something about her. Was she really good enough for him? I doubted it.

I have already mentioned the American comic actor Julia Sweeney and her dogged and endearingly humorous struggle to find some redeeming features in religion and to rescue the God of her childhood from her growing adult doubts. Eventually her quest ended happily, and she is now an admirable role model for young atheists everywhere. The *dénouement* is perhaps the most moving scene of her show *Letting Go of God*. She had tried everything. And then . . .

. . . as I was walking from my office in my backyard into my house, I realized there was this little teeny-weenie voice whispering in my head. I'm not sure how long it had been there, but it suddenly got just one decibel louder. It whispered, 'There is no god.'

And I tried to ignore it. But it got a teeny bit louder.

'There is no god. There is no god. *Oh my god, there is no god?* . . .

And I shuddered. I felt I was slipping off the raft.

And then I thought, 'But I can't. I don't know if I can not believe in God. I need God. I mean, we have a history' . . .

'But I don't know how to not believe in God. I don't know how you do it. How do you get up, how do you get through the day?' I felt unbalanced . . .

I thought, 'Okay, calm down. Let's just try on the

not-believing-in-God glasses for a moment, just for a second. Just put on the no-God glasses and take a quick look around and then immediately throw them off.' And I put them on and I looked around.

I'm embarrassed to report that I initially felt dizzy. I actually had the thought, 'Well, how does the Earth stay up in the sky? You mean, we're just hurtling through space? That's so vulnerable!' I wanted to run out and catch the Earth as it fell out of space into my hands.

And then I remembered, 'Oh yeah, gravity and angular momentum is gonna keep us revolving around the sun for probably a long, long time.'

When I saw *Letting Go of God* in a Los Angeles theatre I was deeply moved by this scene. Especially when Julia went on to tell us of her parents' reaction to a press report of her cure:

My first call from my mother was more of a scream.

'Atheist? ATHEIST?!!'

My dad called and said, 'You have betrayed your family, your school, your city.' It was like I had sold secrets to the Russians. They both said they weren't going to talk to me any more. My dad said, 'I don't even want you to come to my funeral.' After I hung up, I thought, 'Just try and stop me.'

Part of Julia Sweeney's gift is to make you cry and laugh at the same time:

I think that my parents had been mildly disappointed when I'd said I didn't believe in God any more, but being an *atheist* was another thing altogether.

Dan Barker's *Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist* is the story of his gradual conversion from devout fundamentalist minister and zealous travelling preacher to the strong and confident atheist he is today. Significantly, Barker continued to go through the motions of preaching Christianity for a while after he had become an atheist,

because it was the only career he knew and he felt locked into a web of social obligations. He now knows many other American clergymen who are in the same position as he was but have confided only in him, having read his book. They dare not admit their atheism even to their own families, so terrible is the anticipated reaction. Barker's own story had a happier conclusion. To begin with, his parents were deeply and agonizingly shocked. But they listened to his quiet reasoning, and eventually became atheists themselves.

Two professors from one university in America wrote to me independently about their parents. One said that his mother suffers permanent grief because she fears for his immortal soul. The other one said that his father wishes he had never been born, so convinced is he that his son is going to spend eternity in hell. These are highly educated university professors, confident in their scholarship and their maturity, who have presumably left their parents behind in all matters of the intellect, not just religion. Just think what the ordeal must be like for less intellectually robust people, less equipped by education and rhetorical skill than they are, or than Julia Sweeney is, to argue their corner in the face of obdurate family members. As it was for many of Jill Myrton's patients, perhaps.

Earlier in our televised conversation, Jill had described this kind of religious upbringing as a form of mental abuse, and I returned to the point, as follows: 'You use the words religious abuse. If you were to compare the abuse of bringing up a child really to believe in hell . . . how do you think that would compare in trauma terms with sexual abuse?' She replied: 'That's a very difficult question . . . I think there are a lot of similarities actually, because it is about abuse of trust; it is about denying the child the right to feel free and open and able to relate to the world in the normal way . . . it's a form of denigration; it's a form of denial of the true self in both cases.'

IN DEFENCE OF CHILDREN

My colleague the psychologist Nicholas Humphrey used the 'sticks and stones' proverb in introducing his Amnesty Lecture in Oxford

in 1997.¹⁴¹ Humphrey began his lecture by arguing that the proverb is not always true, citing the case of Haitian Voodoo believers who die, apparently from some psychosomatic effect of terror, within days of having a malign 'spell' cast upon them. He then asked whether Amnesty International, the beneficiary of the lecture series to which he was contributing, should campaign against hurtful or damaging speeches or publications. His answer was a resounding no to such censorship in general: 'Freedom of speech is too precious a freedom to be meddled with.' But he then went on to shock his liberal self by advocating one important exception: to argue in favour of censorship for the special case of children...

... moral and religious education, and especially the education a child receives at home, where parents are allowed – even expected – to determine for their children what counts as truth and falsehood, right and wrong. Children, I'll argue, have a human right not to have their minds crippled by exposure to other people's bad ideas – no matter who these other people are. Parents, correspondingly, have no God-given licence to enculturate their children in whatever ways they personally choose: no right to limit the horizons of their children's knowledge, to bring them up in an atmosphere of dogma and superstition, or to insist they follow the straight and narrow paths of their own faith.

In short, children have a right not to have their minds added by nonsense, and we as a society have a duty to protect them from it. So we should no more allow parents to teach their children to believe, for example, in the literal truth of the Bible or that the planets rule their lives, than we should allow parents to knock their children's teeth out or lock them in a dungeon.

Of course, such a strong statement needs, and received, much qualification. Isn't it a matter of opinion what is nonsense? Hasn't the appellation of orthodox science been upset often enough to chasten us into caution? Scientists may think it is nonsense to teach astrology and the literal truth of the Bible, but there are others who

think the opposite, and aren't they entitled to teach it to their children? Isn't it just as arrogant to insist that children should be taught science?

I thank my own parents for taking the view that children should be taught not so much *what* to think as *how* to think. If, having been fairly and properly exposed to all the scientific evidence, they grow up and decide that the Bible is literally true or that the movements of the planets rule their lives, that is their privilege. The important point is that it is *their* privilege to decide what they shall think, and not their parents' privilege to impose it by *force majeure*. And this, of course, is especially important when we reflect that children become the parents of the next generation, in a position to pass on whatever indoctrination may have moulded them.

Humphrey suggests that, as long as children are young, vulnerable and in need of protection, truly moral guardianship shows itself in an honest attempt to second-guess what they *would* choose for themselves if they were old enough to do so. He movingly quotes the example of a young Inca girl whose 500-year-old remains were found frozen in the mountains of Peru in 1995. The anthropologist who discovered her wrote that she had been the victim of a ritual sacrifice. By Humphrey's account, a documentary film about this young 'ice maiden' was shown on American television. Viewers were invited

to marvel at the spiritual commitment of the Inca priests and to share with the girl on her last journey her pride and excitement at having been selected for the signal honour of being sacrificed. The message of the television programme was in effect that the practice of human sacrifice was in its own way a glorious cultural invention – another jewel in the crown of multiculturalism, if you like.

Humphrey is scandalized, and so am I.

Yet, how dare anyone even suggest this? How dare they invite us – in our sitting rooms, watching television – to feel uplifted by contemplating an act of ritual murder: the murder of a dependent child by a group of stupid, puffed

up, superstitious, ignorant old men? How dare they invite us to find good for ourselves in contemplating an immoral action against someone else?

Again, the decent liberal reader may feel a twinge of unease. Immoral by our standards, certainly; and stupid, but what about Inca standards? Surely, to the Incas, the sacrifice was a moral act and far from stupid, sanctioned by all that they held sacred? The little girl was, no doubt, a loyal believer in the religion in which she was brought up. Who are we to use a word like 'murder', judging Inca priests by our own standards rather than theirs? Perhaps this girl was rapturously happy with her fate: perhaps she really believed she was going straight to everlasting paradise, warmed by the radiant company of the Sun God. Or perhaps – as seems far more likely – she screamed in terror.

Humphrey's point – and mine – is that, regardless of whether she was a willing victim or not, there is strong reason to suppose that she would not have been willing if she had been in full possession of the facts. For example, suppose she had known that the sun is really a ball of hydrogen, hotter than a million degrees Kelvin, converting itself into helium by nuclear fusion, and that it originally formed from a disc of gas out of which the rest of the solar system, including Earth, also condensed . . . Presumably, then, she would not have worshipped it as a god, and this would have altered her perspective on being sacrificed to propitiate it.

The Inca priests cannot be blamed for their ignorance, and it could perhaps be thought harsh to judge them stupid and puffed up. But they can be blamed for foisting their own beliefs on a child too young to decide whether to worship the sun or not. Humphrey's additional point is that today's documentary film makers, and we their audience, can be blamed for seeing beauty in that little girl's death – 'something that enriches *our* collective culture'. The same tendency to glory in the quaintness of ethnic religious habits, and to justify cruelties in their name, crops up again and again. It is the source of squirming internal conflict in the minds of nice liberal people who, on the one hand, cannot bear suffering and cruelty, but on the other hand have been trained by postmodernists and relativists to respect other cultures no less than

their own. Female circumcision is undoubtedly hideously painful, it sabotages sexual pleasure in women (indeed, this is probably its underlying purpose), and one half of the decent liberal mind wants to abolish the practice. The other half, however, 'respects' ethnic cultures and feels that we should not interfere if 'they' want to mutilate 'their' girls.* The point, of course, is that 'their' girls are actually the girls' *own* girls, and their wishes should not be ignored. Trickier to answer, what if a girl says she wants to be circumcised? But *would* she, with the hindsight of a fully informed adult, wish that it had never happened? Humphrey makes the point that no adult woman who has somehow missed out on circumcision as a child volunteers for the operation later in life.

After a discussion of the Amish, and their right to bring up 'their own' children in 'their own' way, Humphrey is scathing about our enthusiasm as a society for

maintaining cultural diversity. All right, you may want to say, so it's tough on a child of the Amish, or the Hasidim, or the gypsies to be shaped up by their parents in the ways they are – but at least the result is that these fascinating cultural traditions continue. Would not our whole civilization be impoverished if they were to go? It's a shame, maybe, when individuals have to be sacrificed to maintain such diversity. But there it is: it's the price we pay as a society. Except, I would feel bound to remind you, we do not pay it, *they* do.

The issue came to public attention in 1972 when the US Supreme Court ruled on a test case, Wisconsin versus Yoder, which concerned the right of parents to withdraw their children from school on religious grounds. The Amish people live in closed communities in various parts of the United States, mostly speaking an archaic dialect of German called Pennsylvania Dutch and eschewing, to varying extents, electricity, internal combustion engines, buttons and other manifestations of modern life. There is, indeed, something attractively quaint about an island of seventeenth-century life as a spectacle for today's eyes. Isn't it worth preserving, for the sake of the enrichment of human diversity? And the only way to preserve

* It is a regular practice in Britain today. A senior Schools Inspector told me of London girls in 2006 being sent to an 'uncle' in Bradford to be circumcised. Authorities turn a blind eye, for fear of being thought racist in 'the community'.

it is to allow the Amish to educate their own children in their own way, and protect them from the corrupting influence of modernity. But, we surely want to ask, shouldn't the children themselves have some say in the matter?

The Supreme Court was asked to rule in 1972, when some Amish parents in Wisconsin withdrew their children from high school. The very idea of education beyond a certain age was contrary to Amish religious values, and scientific education especially so. The State of Wisconsin took the parents to court, claiming that the children were being deprived of their right to an education. After passing up through the courts, the case eventually reached the United States Supreme Court, which handed down a split (6:1) decision in favour of the parents.¹⁴² The majority opinion, written by Chief Justice Warren Burger, included the following: 'As the record shows, compulsory school attendance to age 16 for Amish children carries with it a very real threat of undermining the Amish community and religious practice as they exist today; they must either abandon belief and be assimilated into society at large, or be forced to migrate to some other and more tolerant region.'

Justice William O. Douglas's minority opinion was that the children themselves should have been consulted. Did they really want to cut short their education? Did they, indeed, really want to stay in the Amish religion? Nicholas Humphrey would have gone further. Even if the children had been asked and had expressed a preference for the Amish religion, can we suppose that they would have done so if they had been educated and informed about the available alternatives? For this to be plausible, shouldn't there be examples of young people from the outside world voting with their feet and volunteering to join the Amish? Justice Douglas went further in a slightly different direction. He saw no particular reason to give the *religious* views of parents special status in deciding how far they should be allowed to deprive their children of education. If religion is grounds for exemption, might there not be secular beliefs that also qualify?

The majority of the Supreme Court drew a parallel with some of the positive values of monastic orders, whose presence in our society arguably enriches it. But, as Humphrey points out, there is a crucial difference. Monks volunteer for the monastic life of their

own free will. Amish children never volunteered to be Amish; they were born into it and they had no choice.

There is something breathtakingly condescending, as well as inhumane, about the sacrificing of anyone, especially children, on the altar of 'diversity' and the virtue of preserving a variety of religious traditions. The rest of us are happy with our cars and computers, our vaccines and antibiotics. But you quaint little people with your bonnets and breeches, your horse buggies, your archaic dialect and your earth-closet privies, you enrich our lives. Of course you must be allowed to trap your children with you in your seventeenth-century time warp, otherwise something irretrievable would be lost to us: a part of the wonderful diversity of human culture. A small part of me can see something in this. But the larger part is made to feel very queasy indeed.

AN EDUCATIONAL SCANDAL

The Prime Minister of my country, Tony Blair, invoked 'diversity' when challenged in the House of Commons by Jenny Tonge MP to justify government subsidy of a school in the north-east of England that (almost uniquely in Britain) teaches literal biblical creationism. Mr Blair replied that it would be unfortunate if concerns about that issue were to interfere with our getting 'as diverse a school system as we properly can'.¹⁴³ The school in question, Emmanuel College in Gateshead, is one of the 'city academies' set up in a proud initiative of the Blair government. Rich benefactors are encouraged to put up a relatively small sum of money (£2 million in the case of Emmanuel), which buys a much larger sum of government money (£20 million for the school, plus running costs and salaries in perpetuity), and also buys the benefactor the right to control the ethos of the school, the appointment of a majority of the school governors, the policy for exclusion or inclusion of pupils, and much else. Emmanuel's 10 per cent benefactor is Sir Peter Vardy, a wealthy car salesman with a creditable desire to give today's children the education he wishes he had had, and a less creditable desire to imprint his personal religious convictions upon them. * Vardy has

* H. L. Mencken was prophetic when he wrote: 'Deep within the heart of every evangelist lies the wreck of a car salesman.'

unfortunately become embroiled with a clique of American-inspired fundamentalist teachers, led by Nigel McQuoid, sometime headmaster of Emmanuel and now director of a whole consortium of Vardy schools. The level of McQuoid's scientific understanding can be judged from his belief that the world is less than ten thousand years old, and also from the following quotation: 'But to think that we just evolved from a bang, that we used to be monkeys, that seems unbelievable when you look at the complexity of the human body . . . If you tell children there is no purpose to their life – that they are just a chemical mutation – that doesn't build self-esteem.'¹⁴

No scientist has ever suggested that a child is a 'chemical mutation'. The use of the phrase in such a context is illiterate nonsense, on a par with the declarations of 'Bishop' Wayne Malcolm, leader of the Christian Life City church in Hackney, east London, who, according to the *Guardian* of 18 April 2006, 'disputes the scientific evidence for evolution'. Malcolm's understanding of the evidence he disputes can be gauged from his statement that 'There is clearly an absence in the fossil record for intermediate levels of development. If a frog turned into a monkey, shouldn't you have lots of fronkees?'

Well, science is not Mr McQuoid's subject either, so we should, in fairness, turn to his head of science, Stephen Layfield, instead. On 21 September 2001, Mr Layfield gave a lecture at Emmanuel College on 'The Teaching of Science: A Biblical Perspective'. The text of the lecture was posted on a Christian website (www.christian.org.uk). But you won't find it there now. The Christian Institute removed the lecture the very day after I had called attention to it in an article in the *Daily Telegraph* on 18 March 2002, where I subjected it to a critical dissection.¹⁵ It is hard, however, to delete something permanently from the World Wide Web. Search engines achieve their speed partly by keeping caches of information, and these inevitably persist for a while even after the originals have been deleted. An alert British journalist, Andrew Brown, the *Independent's* first religious affairs correspondent, promptly located the Layfield lecture, downloaded it from the Google cache and posted it, safe from deletion, on his own website, <http://www.darwinwars.com/lunatic/liars/layfield.html>. You will notice that the words chosen by Brown for the URL make enter-

taining reading in themselves. They lose their power to amuse, however, when we look at the content of the lecture itself.

Incidentally, when a curious reader wrote to Emmanuel College to ask why the lecture had been removed from the website, he received the following disingenuous reply from the school, again recorded by Andrew Brown:

Emmanuel College has been at the centre of a debate regarding the teaching of creation in schools. At a practical level Emmanuel College has had a huge number of press calls. This has involved a considerable amount of time for the Principal and senior Directors of the College. All of these people have other jobs to do. In order to assist we have temporarily removed a lecture by Stephen Layfield from our website.

Of course, the school officials may well have been too busy to explain to journalists their stance on teaching creationism. But why, then, remove from their website the text of a lecture that does precisely that, and to which they could have referred the journalists, thereby saving themselves a great deal of time? No, they removed their head of science's lecture because they recognized that they had something to hide. The following paragraph is from the beginning of his lecture:

Let us state then right from the start that we reject the notion popularised, perhaps inadvertently, by Francis Bacon in the 17th century that there are 'Two Books' (i.e. the Book of nature & the Scriptures) which may be mined independently for truth. Rather, we stand firm upon the bare proposition that God has spoken authoritatively and inerrantly in the pages of holy Scripture. However fragile, old-fashioned or naive this assertion may ostensibly appear, especially to an unbelieving, TV-drunk modern culture, we can be sure that it is as robust a foundation as it is possible to lay down and build upon.

You have to keep pinching yourself. You are not dreaming. This

is not some preacher in a tent in Alabama but the head of *science* at a school into which the British government is pouring money, and which is Tony Blair's pride and joy. A devout Christian himself, Mr Blair in 2004 performed the ceremonial opening of one of the later additions to the Vardy fleet of schools.¹⁴⁶ Diversity may be a virtue, but this is diversity gone mad.

Layfield proceeds to itemize the comparison between science and scripture, concluding, in every case where there seems to be a conflict, that scripture is to be preferred. Noting that earth science is now included in the national curriculum, Layfield says, 'It would seem particularly prudent for all who deliver this aspect of the course to familiarise themselves with the Flood geology papers of Whitcomb & Morris.' Yes, 'Flood geology' means what you think it means. We're talking Noah's Ark here. Noah's Ark! – when the children could be learning the spine-tingling fact that Africa and South America were once joined, and have drawn apart at the speed with which fingernails grow. Here's more from Layfield (the head of science) on Noah's flood as the recent and rapid explanation for phenomena which, according to real geological evidence, took hundreds of millions of years to grind out:

We must acknowledge within our grand geophysical paradigm the historicity of a world-wide flood as outlined in Gen 6–10. If the Biblical narrative is secure and the listed genealogies (e.g. Gen 5; 1 Chro 1; Matt 1 & Lu 3) are substantially full, we must reckon that this global catastrophe took place in the relatively recent past. Its effects are everywhere abundantly apparent. Principal evidence is found in the fossil-laden sedimentary rocks, the extensive reserves of hydrocarbon fuels (coal, oil and gas) and the 'legendary' accounts of just such a great flood common to various population groups world-wide. The feasibility of maintaining an ark full of representative creatures for a year until the waters had sufficiently receded has been well documented by, among others, John Woodmorappe.

In a way this is even worse than the utterances of know-nothings like Nigel McQuoid or Bishop Wayne Malcolm quoted above,

because Layfield is educated in science. Here's another astonishing passage:

As we stated at the beginning, Christians, with very good reason, reckon the Scriptures of the Old & New Testaments a reliable guide concerning just what we are to believe. They are not merely religious documents. They provide us with a true account of Earth history which we ignore at our peril.

The implication that the scriptures provide a literal account of geological history would make any reputable theologian wince. My friend Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, and I wrote a joint letter to Tony Blair, and we got it signed by eight bishops and nine senior scientists.¹⁴⁷ The nine scientists included the then President of the Royal Society (previously Tony Blair's chief scientific adviser), both the biological and physical secretaries of the Royal Society, the Astronomer Royal (now President of the Royal Society), the director of the Natural History Museum, and Sir David Attenborough, perhaps the most respected man in England. The bishops included one Roman Catholic and seven Anglican bishops – senior religious leaders from all around England. We received a perfunctory and inadequate reply from the Prime Minister's office, referring to the school's good examination results and its good report from the official schools inspection agency, OFSTED. It apparently didn't occur to Mr Blair that, if the OFSTED inspectors give a rave report to a school whose head of science teaches that the entire universe began after the domestication of the dog, there just might be something a teeny weeny bit wrong with the standards of the inspectorate.

Perhaps the most disturbing section of Stephen Layfield's lecture is his concluding 'What can be done?', where he considers the tactics to be employed by those teachers wishing to introduce fundamentalist Christianity into the science classroom. For example, he urges science teachers to

note every occasion when an evolutionary/old-earth paradigm (millions or billions of years) is explicitly

mentioned or implied by a text-book, examination question or visitor and courteously point out the fallibility of the statement. Wherever possible, we must give the alternative (always better) Biblical explanation of the same data. We shall look at a few examples from each of Physics, Chemistry & Biology in due course.

The rest of Layfield's lecture is nothing less than a propaganda manual, a resource for religious teachers of biology, chemistry and physics who wish, while remaining just inside the guidelines of the national curriculum, to subvert evidence-based science education and replace it with biblical scripture.

On 15 April 2006, James Naughtie, one of the BBC's most experienced anchormen, interviewed Sir Peter Vardy on radio. The main subject of the interview was a police investigation of allegations, denied by Vardy, that bribes – knighthoods and peerages – had been offered by the Blair government to rich men, in an attempt to get them to subscribe to the city academies scheme. Naughtie also asked Vardy about the creationism issue, and Vardy categorically denied that Emmanuel promotes young-Earth creationism to its pupils. One of Emmanuel's alumni, Peter French, has equally categorically stated,¹⁴⁸ 'We were taught that the earth was 6000 years old.'* Who is telling the truth here? Well, we don't know, but Stephen Layfield's lecture lays out his policy for teaching science pretty candidly. Has Vardy never read Layfield's very explicit manifesto? Does he really not know what his head of science has been up to? Peter Vardy made his money selling used cars. Would you buy one from him? And would you, like Tony Blair, sell him a school for 10 per cent of its price – throwing in an offer to pay all his running costs into the bargain? Let's be charitable to Blair and assume that he, at least, has not read the Layfield lecture. I suppose it is too much to hope that his attention may now be drawn to it.

Headmaster McQuoid offered a defence of what he clearly saw as his school's open-mindedness, which is remarkable for its patronizing complacency:

the best example I can give of what it is like here is a sixth-form philosophy lecture I was giving. Shaquille was sitting

there and he says, 'The Koran is correct and true.' And Clare, over here, says, 'No, the Bible is true.' So we talked about the similarities between what they say and the places where they disagree. And we agreed that they could not both be true. And eventually I said, 'Sorry Shaquille, you are wrong, it is the Bible that is true.' And he said, 'Sorry Mr McQuoid, you are wrong, it is the Koran.' And they went on to lunch and carried on discussing it there. That's what we want. We want children to know why it is they believe what they believe and to defend it.¹⁴⁹

What a charming picture! Shaquille and Clare went to lunch together, vigorously arguing their cases and defending their incompatible beliefs. But is it really so charming? Isn't it actually rather a deplorable picture that Mr McQuoid has painted? Upon what, after all, did Shaquille and Clare base their argument? What cogent evidence was each one able to bring to bear, in their vigorous and constructive debate? Clare and Shaquille each simply asserted that her or his holy book was superior, and that was that. That is apparently all they said, and that, indeed, is all you *can* say when you have been taught that truth comes from scripture rather than from evidence. Clare and Shaquille and their fellows were not being educated. They were being let down by their school, and their school principal was abusing, not their bodies, but their minds.

CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING AGAIN

And now, here's another charming picture. At Christmas-time one year my daily newspaper, the *Independent*, was looking for a seasonal image and found a heart-warmingly ecumenical one at a school nativity play. The Three Wise Men were played by, as the caption glowingly said, Shadbreet (a Sikh), Musharaff (a Muslim) and Adele (a Christian), all aged four.

Charming? Heart-warming? No, it is not, it is neither; it is grotesque. How could any decent person think it right to label four-year-old children with the cosmic and theological opinions of their

* To get an idea of the scale of this error, it is equivalent to believing that the distance from New York to San Francisco is 700 yards.

parents? To see this, imagine an identical photograph, with the caption changed as follows: 'Shadbreet (a Keynesian), Musharaff (a Monetarist) and Adele (a Marxist), all aged four.' Wouldn't this be a candidate for irate letters of protest? It certainly should be. Yet, because of the weirdly privileged status of religion, not a squeak was heard, nor is it ever heard on any similar occasion. Just imagine the outcry if the caption had read, 'Shadbreet (an Atheist), Musharaff (an Agnostic) and Adele (a Secular Humanist), all aged four.' Mightn't the parents actually be investigated to see if they were fit to bring up children? In Britain, where we lack a constitutional separation between church and state, atheist parents usually go with the flow and let schools teach their children whatever religion prevails in the culture. 'The-Brights.net' (an American initiative to rebrand atheists as 'Brights' in the same way as homosexuals successfully rebranded themselves as 'gays') is scrupulous in setting out the rules for children to sign up: 'The decision to be a Bright must be the child's. Any youngster who is told he or she must, or should, be a Bright can NOT be a Bright.' Can you even begin to imagine a church or mosque issuing such a self-denying ordinance? But shouldn't they be compelled to do so? Incidentally, I signed up to the Brights, partly because I was genuinely curious whether such a word could be memetically engineered into the language. I don't know, and would like to, whether the transmutation of 'gay' was deliberately engineered or whether it just happened.¹⁵⁰ The Brights campaign got off to a shaky start when it was furiously denounced by some atheists, petrified of being branded 'arrogant'. The Gay Pride movement, fortunately, suffers from no such false modesty, which may be why it succeeded.

In an earlier chapter, I generalized the theme of 'consciousness-raising', starting with the achievement of feminists in making us flinch when we hear a phrase like 'men of goodwill' instead of 'people of goodwill'. Here I want to raise consciousness in another way. I think we should all wince when we hear a small child being labelled as belonging to some particular religion or another. Small children are too young to decide their views on the origins of the cosmos, of life and of morals. The very sound of the phrase 'Christian child' or 'Muslim child' should grate like fingernails on a blackboard.

Here is a report, dated 3 September 2001, from the Irish Radio station KPFT-FM.

Catholic schoolgirls faced protests from Loyalists as they attempted to enter the Holy Cross Girls' Primary School on the Ardoyne Road in north Belfast. Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers and British Army (BA) soldiers had to clear the protestors who were attempting to blockade the school. Crash barriers were erected to allow the children to get through the protest to the school. Loyalists jeered and shouted sectarian abuse as the children, some as young as four years of age, were escorted by the parents into the school. As children and parents entered the front gate of the school Loyalists threw bottles and stones.

Naturally, any decent person will wince at the ordeal of these unfortunate schoolgirls. I am trying to encourage us to wince, too, at the very idea of labelling them 'Catholic schoolgirls' at all. ('Loyalists', as I pointed out in Chapter 1, is the mealy-mouthed Northern Ireland euphemism for Protestants, just as 'Nationalists' is the euphemism for Catholics. People who do not hesitate to brand children 'Catholics' or 'Protestants' stop short of applying those same religious labels – far more appropriately – to adult terrorists and mobs.)

Our society, including the non-religious sector, has accepted the preposterous idea that it is normal and right to indoctrinate tiny children in the religion of their parents, and to slap religious labels on them – 'Catholic child', 'Protestant child', 'Jewish child', 'Muslim child', etc. – although no other comparable labels: no conservative children, no liberal children, no Republican children, no Democrat children. Please, please raise your consciousness about this, and raise the roof whenever you hear it happening. A child is not a Christian child, not a Muslim child, but a child of Christian parents or a child of Muslim parents. This latter nomenclature, by the way, would be an excellent piece of consciousness-raising for the children themselves. A child who is told she is a 'child of Muslim parents' will immediately realize that

religion is something for her to choose – or reject – when she becomes old enough to do so.

A good case can indeed be made for the educational benefits of teaching comparative religion. Certainly my own doubts were first aroused, at the age of about nine, by the lesson (which came not from school but from my parents) that the Christian religion in which I was brought up was only one of many mutually incompatible belief-systems. Religious apologists themselves realize this and it often frightens them. After that nativity play story in the *Independent*, not a single letter to the Editor complained of the religious labelling of the four-year-olds. The only negative letter came from 'The Campaign for Real Education', whose spokesman, Nick Seaton, said multi-faith religious education was extremely dangerous because 'Children these days are taught that all religions are of equal worth, which means that their own has no special value.' Yes indeed; that is exactly what it means. Well might this spokesman worry. On another occasion, the same individual said, 'To present all faiths as equally valid is wrong. Everybody is entitled to think their faith is superior to others, be they Hindus, Jews, Muslims or Christians – otherwise what's the point in having faith?'¹⁵¹

What indeed? And what transparent nonsense this is! These faiths are mutually incompatible. Otherwise what is the point of thinking your faith superior? Most of them, therefore, cannot be 'superior to others'. Let children learn about different faiths, let them notice their incompatibility, and let them draw their own conclusions about the consequences of that incompatibility. As for whether any are 'valid', let them make up their own minds when they are old enough to do so.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AS A PART OF LITERARY CULTURE

I must admit that even I am a little taken aback at the biblical ignorance commonly displayed by people educated in more recent

decades than I was. Or maybe it isn't a decade thing. As long ago as 1954, according to Robert Hinde in his thoughtful book *Why Gods Persist*, a Gallup poll in the United States of America found the following. Three-quarters of Catholics and Protestants could not name a single Old Testament prophet. More than two-thirds didn't know who preached the Sermon on the Mount. A substantial number thought that Moses was one of Jesus's twelve apostles. That, to repeat, was in the United States, which is dramatically more religious than other parts of the developed world.

The King James Bible of 1611 – the Authorized Version – includes passages of outstanding literary merit in its own right, for example the Song of Songs, and the sublime Ecclesiastes (which I am told is pretty good in the original Hebrew too). But the main reason the English Bible needs to be part of our education is that it is a major source book for literary culture. The same applies to the legends of the Greek and Roman gods, and we learn about them without being asked to believe in them. Here is a quick list of biblical, or Bible-inspired, phrases and sentences that occur commonly in literary or conversational English, from great poetry to hackneyed cliché, from proverb to gossip.

Be fruitful and multiply • East of Eden • Adam's Rib •
Am I my brother's keeper? • The mark of Cain • As old
as Methuselah • A mess of pottage • Sold his birthright •
Jacob's ladder • Coat of many colours • Amid the alien
corn • Eyeless in Gaza • The fat of the land • The fatted
calf • Stranger in a strange land • Burning bush • A land
flowing with milk and honey • Let my people go • Flesh
pots • An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth • Be
sure your sin will find you out • The apple of his eye •
The stars in their courses • Butter in a lordly dish • The
hosts of Midian • Shibboleth • Out of the strong came
forth sweetness • He smote them hip and thigh •
Philistine • A man after his own heart • Like David and
Jonathan • Passing the love of women • How are the
mighty fallen? • Ewe lamb • Man of Belial • Jezebel •
Queen of Sheba • Wisdom of Solomon • The half was
not told me • Girded up his loins • Drew a bow at a

venture • Job's comforters • The patience of Job • I am escaped with the skin of my teeth • The price of wisdom is above rubies • Leviathan • Go to the ant thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise • Spare the rod and spoil the child • A word in season • Vanity of vanities • To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose • The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong • Of making many books there is no end • I am the rose of Sharon • A garden inclosed • The little foxes • Many waters cannot quench love • Beat their swords into plowshares • Grind the faces of the poor • The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid • Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die • Set thine house in order • A voice crying in the wilderness • No peace for the wicked • See eye to eye • Cut off out of the land of the living • Balm in Gilead • Can the leopard change his spots? • The parting of the ways • A Daniel in the lions' den • They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind • Sodom and Gomorrah • Man shall not live by bread alone • Get thee behind me Satan • The salt of the earth • Hide your light under a bushel • Turn the other cheek • Go the extra mile • Moth and rust doth corrupt • Cast your pearls before swine • Wolf in sheep's clothing • Weeping and gnashing of teeth • Gadarene swine • New wine in old bottles • Shake off the dust of your feet • He that is not with me is against me • Judgement of Solomon • Fell upon stony ground • A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country • The crumbs from the table • Sign of the times • Den of thieves • Pharisee • Whited sepulchre • Wars and rumours of wars • Good and faithful servant • Separate the sheep from the goats • I wash my hands of it • The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath • Suffer the little children • The widow's mite • Physician heal thyself • Good Samaritan • Passed by on the other side • Grapes of wrath • Lost sheep • Prodigal son • A great gulf fixed • Whose shoe latchet I am not

worthy to unloose • Cast the first stone • Jesus wept • Greater love hath no man than this • Doubting Thomas • Road to Damascus • A law unto himself • Through a glass darkly • Death, where is thy sting? • A thorn in the flesh • Fallen from grace • Filthy lucre • The root of all evil • Fight the good fight • All flesh is as grass • The weaker vessel • I am Alpha and Omega • Armageddon • De profundis • Quo vadis • Rain on the just and on the unjust

Every one of these idioms, phrases or clichés comes directly from the King James Authorized Version of the Bible. Surely ignorance of the Bible is bound to impoverish one's appreciation of English literature? And not just solemn and serious literature. The following rhyme by Lord Justice Bowen is ingeniously witty:

The rain it raineth on the just,
And also on the unjust fella.
But chiefly on the just, because
The unjust hath the just's umbrella.

But the enjoyment is muffled if you can't take the allusion to Matthew 5: 45 ('For he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust'). And the fine point of Eliza Dolittle's fantasy in *My Fair Lady* would escape anybody ignorant of John the Baptist's end:

'Thanks a lot, King,' says I in a manner well bred,
'But all I want is 'Enry 'iggins' 'ead.'

P. G. Wodehouse is, for my money, the greatest writer of light comedy in English, and I bet fully half my list of biblical phrases will be found as allusions within his pages. (A Google search will not find all of them, however. It will miss the derivation of the short-story title 'The Aunt and the Sluggard', from Proverbs 6: 6.) The Wodehouse canon is rich in other biblical phrases, not in my list above and not incorporated into the language as idioms or proverbs. Listen to Bettie Wooster's evocation of what it is like to

wake up with a bad hangover: 'I had been dreaming that some boulder was driving spikes through my head – not just ordinary spikes, as used by Jael the wife of Heber, but red-hot ones.' Bertie himself was immensely proud of his only scholastic achievement; the prize he once earned for scripture knowledge.

What is true of comic writing in English is more obviously true of serious literature. Naseeb Shaheen's tally of more than thirteen hundred biblical references in Shakespeare's works is widely cited and very believable.¹⁵² The *Bible Literacy Report* published in Fairfax, Virginia (admittedly financed by the infamous Templeton Foundation) provides many examples, and cites overwhelming agreement by teachers of English literature that biblical literacy is essential to full appreciation of their subject.¹⁵³ Doubtless the equivalent is true of French, German, Russian, Italian, Spanish and other great European literatures. And, for speakers of Arabic and Indian languages, knowledge of the Qur'an or the Bhagavad Gita is presumably just as essential for full appreciation of their literary heritage. Finally, to round off the list, you can't appreciate Wagner (whose music, as has been wittily said, is better than it sounds) without knowing your way around the Norse gods.

Let me not labour the point. I have probably said enough to convince at least my older readers that an atheistic world-view provides no justification for cutting the Bible, and other sacred books, out of our education. And of course we can retain a sentimental loyalty to the cultural and literary traditions of, say, Judaism, Anglicanism or Islam, and even participate in religious rituals such as marriages and funerals, without buying into the supernatural beliefs that historically went along with those traditions. We can give up belief in God while not losing touch with a treasured heritage.

CHAPTER 10

A much needed gap?

What can be more soul shaking than peering through a 100-inch telescope at a distant galaxy, holding a 100-million-year-old fossil or a 500,000-year-old stone tool in one's hand, standing before the immense chasm of space and time that is the Grand Canyon, or listening to a scientist who gazed upon the face of the universe's creation and did not blink? That is deep and sacred science.

MICHAEL SHERMER