

THE UNBELIEVER'S BIBLE

by

Barbara G. Walker

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As an artist, she created 78 original paintings for the *Barbara Walker Tarot Deck*, and 64 more for her *I Ching of the Goddess* cards, both published with companion books. She was a professional knitwear designer, and her books on knitting patterns are American classics. She invented over a thousand original pattern stitches, more than any other single person known to history. She also invented a new system for charting patterns, developed a color technique that she named Mosaic Knitting, and received an *Inspiration* award from *Vogue Knitting* magazine.

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Works by Barbara G. Walker

ARTWORK

- The Barbara Walker Tarot Deck
- The I Ching of the Goddess card deck
- "The Woman's Dictionary" illustrations

FICTION

- Amazon: A Novel
- Feminist Fairy Tales

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

- The Skeptical Feminist: Discovering the Virgin, Mother, and Crone

HISTORY/SPIRITUALITY

- The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets
- The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects
- The Secrets of the Tarot: Origins, History, and Symbolism
- The Essential Handbook of Women's Spirituality and Ritual
- The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom and Power
- The I Ching of the Goddess
- The Book of Sacred Stones: Fact and Fallacy in the Crystal World
- Restoring the Goddess: Equal Rites for Modern Women
- Man Made God: A Collection of Essays
- Belief and Unbelief

KNITTING AND KNITWEAR DESIGN

- A Treasury of Knitting Patterns
- A Second Treasury of Knitting Patterns
- A Third Treasury of Knitting Patterns (Charted Knitting Designs)
- A Fourth Treasury of Knitting Patterns (Sampler Knitting)
- Knitting from the Top
- Mosaic Knitting
- Barbara Walker's Learn-to-Knit Afghan Book
- The Craft of Lace Knitting
- The Craft of Cable-Stitch Knitting
- The Craft of Multicolor Knitting

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INTRODUCTION

These essays cover many years of research, study, and personal response. The reader will find a fair amount of repetition, as writings from different times will occasionally refer to the same examples. Taken as a whole, they amount to the reactions of one individual to the mental and emotional attitudes of modern society. In a culture of free thought, you are naturally encouraged to expose your mind to differing opinions, without prejudice one way or the other. I offer this collection of miscellaneous writings for your consideration, without insisting that you agree with them. In any event, read and enjoy.

MY CONVERSION

I was six years old, and stricken with grief over the recent death of my dearly beloved dog. Our minister dropped by to visit my mother, and I asked him to tell me how I would meet my dog again in heaven. He said I would not meet my dog in heaven, because animals have no souls and God does not allow them in heaven. I would, however, meet all my relatives in heaven, wasn't that nice?

I was horrified. I tried to negotiate. I said I would be willing to trade a couple of aunts and uncles for my dog. The minister said God would not trade. I stamped my foot and said I thought God was mean, and I didn't want to go to his nasty old petless heaven anyway, and I ran away crying.

My embarrassed mother made me come back and apologize, but I my heart wasn't in it. I detested the minister from that day onward. Furthermore, what I learned about God in Sunday school did not improve my opinion of him. For instance, why would an allegedly loving and all-powerful Father have to make his Son die a cruel death before he was willing to forgive people? Why not forgive them right off? And if he did agree to forgive them after the Son's death, why was he still sending people to his super-sadistic hell for all eternity? (I had a Catholic friend who told me that my whole family would go to hell anyway, because we went to the wrong church. Her parochial-school "Sister" said so.)

I was a nuisance in Sunday school. I asked many questions, but I got no answers. I was told that questioning was evil, and I must simply believe everything, because that was God's rule. Worst of all, I was expected to become a cannibal and consume the actual flesh and blood of Jesus, whose gory demise was shown to us children in a life-size painting. I wondered, what kind of a Father arranges the cruel death of his own Son, then tells people to eat him?

Later, as an adolescent, I decided to find the answers on my own. I would go to the source, and read the Bible for myself, cover to cover. I didn't expect to find God so completely demonized by his own "holy word", yet the biblical stories gave him so evil a character that I was astonished that anyone could call it the Good Book or continue to respect its main protagonist.

The divine monster of the original old King James version has been to some extent whitewashed by later editing and revising, but he is still bad enough so that perhaps the greatest miracle of modern Christianity is how he can appear good to the Bible-reading fundies. He played a very cruel trick on Abraham, for example, ordering him to kill his son (there was a lot of eldest-child sacrifice in Old Testament times, apparently). I despised Abraham for caving in. I decided that if God ordered me to kill my child, I would tell God to go to hell.

Then there was the story of Job, which everybody seemed to think a valuable moral lesson. On a whim, God slaughtered all of Job's relatives, servants, and domestic animals, apparently to win a bet. Readers were supposed to feel sorry for poor Job, but neither God nor anyone else seemed to pity all those murdered innocents.

God certainly didn't mean it when he said "Thou shalt not kill." In all the Old Testament books, God ordered gigantic slaughters of men, women, children, babies, and domestic animals, excepting only virgin girls, who were to be taken prisoner and raped by God's warriors. God commanded the murders of witches, homosexuals, adulterers, blasphemers, any of your family members who fail to worship him properly, and any person who works on the Sabbath (Ex. 31), which automatically condemns all employees of airlines, hospitals, drugstores, supermarkets, and department stores, among others.

God had forty-two children torn to pieces by bears because they made fun of Elisha's bald head. He killed poor Uzzah for touching the Ark, though Uzzah was only trying to save it from falling off its oxcart. He slaughtered all the firstborn children in Egypt. He afflicted thousands with punitive lightning, plagues, famine, blasting, consumption, and hemorrhoids (King James "emerods").(Deu. 28). He told his warriors to slash open the bellies of pregnant women (Hosea 13) and bragged that he had destroyed many nations (Zeph. 3).

God condoned slavery, rape, and torture. He allowed men to sell their daughters into slavery, or to beat a slave nearly to death with no punishment if the victim survived for a few days (Ex. 21). Jesus also said it was permissible to whip slaves (Luke 12). Jesus said a lot of other foolish things, such as a man who wishes to be sure of getting into heaven should have himself castrated (Matthew 19). He promised that anyone who believes in him can drink poison and play with venomous snakes without

harm (Mark 16). Such demonstrations of faith have been tried, often with rather disappointing results.

To my adolescent self, this biblical brute was terrifying. If he could do such awful things to innocent people, what would he do to me, with all my taboo questions? Eventually, though, I got tired of being scared and began to be angry. With a desperate cornered-rat sort of courage, I undertook to challenge the God who probably knew already how much I disliked him. One night during a violent thunderstorm, I dared him to blast me with his lightning, figuring that my parents could think it a natural accident and not know that it was my own fault. I lay in my bed and said to the heavens: "I hate you. I think you stink."

Then I gritted my teeth, squeezed my eyes shut, clenched my fists, and waited for the deadly stroke. It didn't come. I issued my declarations again, but there was no response. Gradually I came to the conclusion that I spoke into a celestial telephone with no one at the other end. All those fears had been put into me for nothing. He wasn't there at all!

The next morning I woke up and went to school feeling free and light as air. All alone, I had been born again in reverse: liberated forever from that dismal sense of oppression, newly convinced that my disapproval of God was entirely justified. Never again would I be mentally or emotionally enslaved by a cruel mythology. I was converted to truth.

SCHOOL PRAYER

During my school years, academic prayer was always there. It was not an issue; no one was granted any right to object. God was incessantly called upon to bless assemblies, school ceremonies, and sporting events. Teachers seemed to claim the power to compel God's attention, or to change his mind for him in case he hadn't been planning to bless their occasion in the first place. They gave the distinct impression that they had God's ear.

This impression is one of the hidden motives of school-prayer advocates. They feel that children should be made aware of adults' apparently direct line to the mind of God, a little step up from the threat "I'll tell your father on you." No matter how trivial or dire the subject, God was listening. Whether you feared failing a test, or your little brother had a serious case of rheumatic fever and might die, in either case you were supposed to get help if you were sufficiently and properly abject. If it didn't work, well, it wasn't his will. This conclusion always made me wonder: why bother with prayer at all, since God was going to do whatever he wanted to do anyway?

I was always bemused by the implication that God was malleable, so open to manipulation by humans. Along with Omar Khayyam I wondered, "Who art thou to teach, and he to learn?" If God had made up his mind to do things a particular way, to lead us into temptation on that particular day for example, who are we to talk him out of it? Was he really so weak and malleable that a few words from some insignificant humans could change his intentions? And if he was not so, whatever was the point of all the prayer? It was an insoluble puzzle.

In my case, school prayer served little purpose other than to bore me, and to hear those sonorous academic voices with something like pity, because I thought they might be trying to convince themselves that they were being heard by someone other than an audience of itchy, impatient children who were just waiting for it to be over.

Of course, as churchmen through the ages have known, God must be presented and presented and presented *ad nauseam* to children in their formative years, if they are to become truly believing adults. What sinks into the child even through boredom can become fixed, and the resulting

adult never really knows the origin of the concept that he thinks self-evident. School prayer is really belief manipulation. Advocates think children ought to hear grownups expressing belief in God, never wondering where the concept came from, or how there could be so many portraits painted of the bearded man in the sky, when no one had ever really seen him.

In thus brainwashing children by rote and repetition, we have forgotten how evil a dominant, domineering, legislated religion can be. Separation of church and state was one of the best ideas put forward by the founding fathers of the United States, who knew all too well the horrors perpetrated by European theocracy. Unfortunately, many Americans today have lost touch with this history.

Children need to be protected from forced beliefs. Instead of training them to call on an outmoded emotional construct, they should be taught to trust their own foresight and responsibility, to change what they can change, and to accept what they can't -- and, naturally, to teach them the wisdom to know the difference.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH GOD?

Nonbelievers are often asked, why not accept the idea of God as a harmless one at least, a force for good, an inspiration to bring out the best in people. But when I read the Bible as a teenager, I found a lot of reasons why not. The biblical God is hardly harmless. He is incredibly cruel, irrational, vain, sadistic, and untrustworthy. In spite of saying "Thou shalt not kill" at one point, he orders endless massacres: whole cities to be wiped out, men, women, children, animals, all. He says that slaves and children may be beaten; homosexuals, adulterers, blasphemers, people who work on the Sabbath, and victims of rape should be killed; enemies' babies may be battered to death on rocks, and pregnant women can have their bellies slashed open (Hos. 13:16). He orders you to murder any members of your own family that don't sufficiently respect him (Deut. 13:6-9). He sends wild animals to kill children (2 Kings 2:23-24). He is a jealous God, full of vengeance and wrath (Nahum 1:2). He brags that he has destroyed many nations (Zeph. 3:6). He even admits: "I create evil" (Isa. 45:7).

In Genesis, he kills almost every living creature on earth because a few people failed to praise him enough. He is the ultimate embodiment of male egotism; his appetite for praise is insatiable. He demands it every minute, from everybody, for all eternity. We have been told that one of the components of heavenly "bliss" is that we will join the choirs of angels in singing God's praises forever and ever. Well, that might be entertaining for half an hour, but for all eternity? More like hell. The pagans had a better idea, that heavenly "bliss" would be like a perpetual orgasm; but of course the prudish God would not allow *that*.

As a child I was told about one of God's worst crimes. He arranged to have his own son murdered, to induce himself to save some of the people from the hell of eternal torture that he created to punish the sins he knew they would commit, because he made them that way. What kind of a father is it who kills his own allegedly beloved son? And why should it be so pleasing to him? But even this death would not eliminate God's hell altogether, because the blessed ones in heaven needed to enjoy the sadistic pleasure of a perfect view of the tortures of the damned, according to St. Thomas Aquinas and other God-ly folks. My childhood self wondered, what was the point of killing Jesus? If an all-powerful God wanted to save people, couldn't he just eliminate hell, without all the

folderol of a crude filicidal sacrifice? But no. Apparently God really wanted to intimidate his poor subjects with that vision of endless agony that only really sick minds could create, and that same imaginary fear made enormous profits over the millennia for God's ever-greedy minions on earth.

I find it incredible that people can read what the Bible says about this God's character and still think him harmless, benevolent, or anything like lovable. The Bible presents him as a monster of vanity and cruelty, the "jealous God" that people were commanded to fear. The men who created and developed his character were like schoolyard bullies, relishing their ability to make others tremble. They were obviously aggressive, misogynist, sadistic, and enormously egotistical, all covering the basic insecurity that gives rise to such aberrations. They made a God in their own image: a God that I found hugely unworthy. I wanted neither his heaven nor his hell, and felt much more comfortable after dismissing them. My future may be limited, like that of every other life form on earth, but that's better than either of God's alternatives.

POWER: WHY RELIGION?

The first lesson that we learn in life is that we are utterly powerless. We can do nothing for ourselves. We can't even get ourselves to the teat, as other newborn mammals can. We can only cry until a mysteriously benevolent giant woman comes and puts us to her breast or to a bottle. We can't do anything, even sit up, without help. We must lie in our own filth until someone cleans us. We can only hope that the giants will be kind and attend to our needs. Usually, they do. Then we smile.

Of course we can see here not only the prehistoric Titans or Giants in every mythology (including that of the Bible), but also the genesis of later deities. In babyhood we are utterly dependent on the mother who is bigger, wiser, stronger than ourselves. It explains why the first and oldest deity in every early mythology is the Mother/Creatress, our first and oldest perception of beneficent divinity. She was humanity's most basic concept of the primal power to create life, which our primitive ancestors perceived as being embodied only in women. It was Mother who told us how to live.

Even before we learn to use words, we know that vocal sounds gain the attention of our caretakers. We are born wailing our protest against our sudden traumatic expulsion from our peaceful intrauterine Eden. Here lies the original rationale of prayer: when you make sounds that the powerful ones can hear, they cooperate.

It is interesting that all over the world, in all ages, the standard gesture of appeal to a deity is the child's instinctive raising of both arms toward the adult. In childhood it means pick me up, hold me, comfort me, feed me. In adulthood it means bless me, hear me, help me. We see the same gesture performed even by infant chimpanzees and other primates.

On our sounds of appeal are based all the magical formulae, addresses, beggings, charms, blessings and curses, invocations and evocations of all religious traditions, plus the incredibly arrogant belief that the universe has huge human-like powers able to pay attention to our tiny vocalizations. We gain a false sense of our own importance, as well as an equally false conviction of our ability to influence Nature. As babies we feel ourselves to be at the center of everything. Later, we postulate deities whose works are eternal and unalterable, yet we imagine that our individual wishes have the power to alter them. When prayers don't work, we must

invent excuses: it wasn't God's will, or we are too sinful, or some demon thwarted us, or we didn't use the right words. Seldom is it suggested that there aren't any divine ears listening in the first place.

To make Nature amenable to our whims, humans invent thousands of human-imitative beings supposedly in charge of events, so we can make things happen the way we want. In our primitive cultures we talk to spirits of nature, earth and sky, life and death, good and evil; everything has a spirit amenable to flattery and pleadings, much like a parent. We love to imagine ourselves able to induce these entities to listen and obey. We may wrap them up in a single package and call it Goddess or God, a being willing to change the course of the world to take care of our needs (even though, paradoxically, S/He has already established it unalterably for all time). How pathetic we are, thinking so highly of ourselves in a universe far more vast than we can even begin to envision, mostly unknown, and certainly unhuman. Power: how desperately we wish to claim it, and how little we actually have.

Over the centuries, some canner humans found ways to achieve real power over their fellows, by exploiting naive beliefs for their own incomes and social prestige. Seers and saviors, prophets and priests, all manner of pretenders learned to make a living off the credulity of others, sometimes providing genuine help but often insisting on pointless rituals in return for their upkeep. Once the believer is convinced of the necessity for ritual, its practice can develop exponentially, as shown by today's international religious corporations, busily convincing each new generation that it must continue the customs forever, Or Else.

The consequences of apostasy became correspondingly more dire: the horrors of Inquisitions, crusades, witch hunts, holocausts; the emphasis on eternal torture in hell, the most sadistic concept ever imagined. This "fear of God" -- specifically, of his eternal punishment -- was considered essential to make people behave decently. It is not so much the fear of death that fuels religiosity, because religion introduces even worse fears. It is rather the fear of abandonment by the authority figure: no one to tell us what to do, how to live. Unlike lower animals, who know by instinct how to conduct their lives, humans need to be told. We obey orders even when they feel wrong, as when soldiers are taught to kill innocent civilians, an act usually considered evil but always endorsed by their God in times of war.

Unfortunately, much of religion's lust for power provokes attacks on those who refuse to believe, or who believe differently. When supplied with temporal power to wage war against the so-called infidel, it does so with enthusiasm. The atrocities committed in religious persecutions are the most numerous and most vicious in all of human history. While prating of love, many sects really preached hatred. They hated the nonbeliever, the infidel, the pagan, the wrong race or the wrong sex -- which has been the female sex, ever since the advent of monotheistic patriarchy. The Judeo-Christian God, having allegedly said "Thou shalt not kill," then ordered massacres that killed millions, and many other cruelties. This God still insists on infidel-destruction today, via his Koranic tradition.

It is often supposed that a major power of religion lies in the promise of immortality: the one promise that never has to be kept. Religions have built the world's most profitable tax-free business on selling this non-product, which they don't need to deliver. The belief is supported by nothing but hot air: words. There has never been one scrap of empirical evidence for the belief, but empirical evidence is not required. Words alone do the trick, bringing in the money, the power, and the hordes of flattering, fawning followers.

Today, the destructive lust for power that fuels the wars of both politics and religion creates serious danger to ourselves and our world. We must overcome false beliefs and realize our dependence on one another, rather than on imaginary deities. As far as we are ever likely to know, this planet is the only one available for us to live on. Our survival as a species may depend on realistic recognition of this, so we can use our brains take better care of it. Reason, not religion, gives us a power that is useful, and does not lie, or foster ignorance and hatred. May we soon transcend our spiritual infancy and grow up.

SEXUALITY AND RELIGION

Ten or twelve thousand years ago, some humans first realized that sexual activity actually had something to do the production of new life, formerly considered an enviable magic embodied only in females. Once fatherhood began to be recognized, men could assert that sexual activity was something more than a mere pleasure. As an essential part of the mysterious miracle of life-giving, it could be revered as sacred.

Early peoples generally had very positive views on sexuality. In Graeco-Roman times, sexual pleasure was widely believed to be a foretaste of paradise, a gift of the goddess Aphrodite/Venus. Some claimed that a blessed afterlife would consist of an eternal orgasm. This concept contributed to the later Muslim notion of the so-called "seventy-two virgins" to be enjoyed by male heroes in the afterlife. However, the word "virgin" is a bowdlerized re-interpretation of the original term, *houri*, cognate with "whore"; it denoted a sexual angel charged with the duty to pleasure male heroes for all eternity. Of course, this was a profoundly patriarchal concept. Virtuous women, no matter how heroic, were never to be provided with comparable postmortem lovers.

Indeed, Islam was generally devoted to the idea that women should experience no sexual pleasure at all, for fear that they might wish to trade a sexually inept husband for a somewhat better lover. To this end, they practiced routine clitoridectomy, often wrongly described as "female circumcision." It is nothing like circumcision. It is comparable to what would be, in male anatomy, amputation of the penis, and it usually included extensive mutilation of the vulva as well. Over the centuries, untold numbers of women died of these operations or the ensuing infections. In some Muslim sects, women's genitals were sewed nearly closed, leaving only a small opening for urine and menstrual effluent, and for her wedding night a virgin would have to be mutilated again. According to a study reported in 2019, over 200 million women alive today have been subjected to this horrendous procedure.

But these were customs of a fully developed patriarchy, centuries after initial recognition of sexuality as a basic life-giving magic. Earlier male gods proudly displayed endless erections to demonstrate superhuman potency. Phallus worship was not uncommon. In Egypt for example, the earth god Geb was shown lying face up, erect phallus

reaching up to the goddess Nut, queen of the night, as she passed overhead, while the stars of the Milky Way, still so named, poured from her world-nourishing breasts. His phallus was represented by the obelisk, of which many examples still exist. It is perhaps amusing that the biggest obelisk in the world today is the Washington Monument.

Roman roads often sported the statues known as "herms" at their crossroads, which travelers would touch for good luck as they passed by. A herm is a short stone pillar with the head of the god Hermes carved at the top, and an erect penis sticking out halfway up the column. Ritual consecration of crossroads contributed to the later witchcraft craze, in which inquisitors claimed that witches engaged in evil ceremonies at crossroads. Of course, all their claims were amply confirmed by their routine use of torture.

The charm involved in touching the sexual parts of a deity seems to have first arisen very long ago in India, where temples of the original world-creating goddess Kali Ma featured a yoni or vulva symbol at the doorway, where worshipers could touch it as they entered. The goddess was shown in a crouching posture, knees apart, displaying her yoni in the form of an upright, double-pointed oval. The same symbolism was found among the Aryan tribes who first populated Ireland. It is shown by the pre-Christian sheila-na-gig statues, which used to appear over the doors of houses of worship until the Catholic church declared them evil and removed them. Some are still found in museums.

The pointed-oval yoni design has had an interesting history. Some versions of the Indian symbol were given two small curls at one end, signifying the tail of a fish. It was generally held that women's sexual secretions smelled like fish. There was even a goddess figure whose name meant "Fishy Smell." Fish were therefore held to be aphrodisiac foods, and the Aryans of northern Europe ate fish on Friday, the day sacred to the goddess Freya, in order to maintain fertility and good sexual relations. Then the church took over fish-eating Friday and declared it a "fast day" sacred to Jesus, who was described in medieval literature as "the little Fish that the Virgin caught in the fountain." Christians later adopted the yoni, turned horizontally, and declared it a symbol of Jesus. I am always amused by seeing a yoni on the bumper of a fundamentalist car. I think, if they only knew.

One of the most common yonic symbols, world-wide, was the cowrie shell, named after a pre-Vedic version of the goddess, Kauri, in India. Romans called the shell *matriculus*, "the little matrix" or womb. The Greek word *kteis* meant either a cowrie shell or a vulva. Gypsy women favored the cowrie as a prime amulet for female powers. Native Americans also revered the shell, and because of its sacredness it sometimes became the medium of exchange, as wampum.

Just as phallic symbols were widely worshiped in earlier pre-patriarchal times, so also were yonic symbols. The famous *omphalos* or "navel-stone" in the temple of the Delphic Oracle is an example that has been widely misunderstood. According to its myth, the Delphic shrine was long sacred to the original earth goddess Gaia, mother of the world, until it was taken over by the sun god Apollo; but the priestess who gave the oracular speeches remained a female, the so-called Pythia, receiving her inspiration from deep in the earth rather than from Apollo's sunlight. The so-called navel stone does not look like a navel. It looks like a clitoris, a word derived from the Greek *kleite*, meaning "divine, famous, goddess-like." It is hardly to be wondered at if women formerly worshiped their own sexual nature, just as men later engaged in widespread phallus worship.

Symbols of sexual conjunction were also fairly common. A prime example is the Egyptian ankh, which shows a round or oval female sign on top of a cross, which was a common sign of male genitalia. Another such sign was the hexagram, known as the *Sri Yantra* or Great Yantra, revered in India as showing the union of Kali, the downward-pointing triangle, with her son/consort Shiva, the upward-pointing triangle. It was never mentioned in Jewish literature until the 12th century, and was adopted as an official sign of Judaism only in the 17th century. In literature of the medieval Kabbala it represented God united with the Shekina or female world soul, and it was said to be in the Ark along with the tablets of the law, showing "a man and woman in ultimate embrace." All this history was quite deliberately forgotten when it came to be called the Star of David or Seal of Solomon, though it had nothing to do with either of them.

Among the various warring sects of early Christianity, there were some Gnostic groups that still defined the "bliss" of heaven as sexual in nature, and practiced "sacred sex" in their shrines like the pagans before them. St. Valentine, adopted by the church as a patron of lovers, was a semi-mythical Valentinus whose festival took place in the Ides of February, the month sacred to the goddess Juno Februata, when she was in her

febris (fever) of love. The Gnostics performed what was called "a rite of spiritual marriage with angels in a nuptial chamber". St. Valentine was a sketchily Christianized version of the love god otherwise known as Eros, Cupid, Priapus, or Kama, all names associated with the goddess in sexual rituals aimed at promoting fertility.

However, when the official church finally began to take shape in the early fourth century, the sects that formerly allowed some form of sexual license were condemned. The church was influenced by the trend toward asceticism that had begun in India with yogis who claimed that self-denial of all earthly pleasures would enable the performance of miracles like healing the sick, walking on water, and achieving nirvana while still alive. The earliest Christian saints were then declared extreme ascetics who starved, whipped, deprived, and generally abused themselves in order to atone for every sin and become particularly blessed. Sex became the instrument of the devil and the tool whereby women -- those "daughters of Eve" -- enticed men into evil behavior. According to St. Augustine, sex was the root of original sin and the means of transmitting it to all generations, and sex is never sinless even within marriage. Tertullian said sex renders marriage "obscene." Numenius of Apamea proclaimed that only total cessation of sexual activity could unite the soul with God.

Early fathers of the church became intensely committed to denial and condemnation of sexuality. St. Jerome ordered: "Regard everything as poison which bears within it the seed of sexual pleasure." St. Athanasius said the only real message of Jesus was the saving grace of chastity. Legends were promulgated about (mostly imaginary) saints so holy that they chose physical torture ahead of sexual pleasure. Medieval theologians said sex "caused the damnation of humanity, which was on its account put out of Paradise, and for its sake Christ was killed."

According to Dr. Joseph Fletcher of the Episcopal Theological School, "Christian churches must shoulder much of the blame for the confusion, ignorance, and guilt which surrounds sex in Western culture." R.E.L. Masters wrote, "Almost the entire blame for poisoning the sexual life of the West, rests squarely on the Roman Catholic Church." For many centuries the church insisted that even marriage should be as devoid of sexual pleasure as possible, undertaken only for reproductive purposes. Masturbation was defined as "a grave moral disorder."

For most of European history, the ancient world's knowledge of the location and function of the clitoris was totally suppressed, unknown even to a majority of women. When discovered on the victim of a witch trial, it was usually described as a "devil's teat." In 1503, an English gaoler (though married) apparently saw one for the first time and said it was "a little lump of flesh, sticking out as if it had been a teat," which at first sight he "meant not to disclose, because it was adjoining to so secret a place which was not decent to be seen; yet in the end, not willing to conceal so strange a matter," he showed it to sundry bystanders, who had never seen anything like it either. The witch was convicted and killed.

In the Victorian era, priests held that "total repression of woman's sexuality was crucial to ensure her subjugation." Leading medical authorities like Dr. Isaac Brown Baker performed many clitoridectomies to cure women of such symptoms of sexual frustration as "nervousness, hysteria, and female dementia." Such operations were also recommended to keep young women from masturbating. In the United States, the last recorded clitoridectomy to cure masturbation was performed in 1948 on a five-year-old girl.

In the end, patriarchal efforts to repress female sexuality punished men also, since they led to repression of sexuality in general. When forbidden normal expressions of human love, both men and women suffer. Patriarchal religion has been the primary offender in promulgating this cultural distortion, from which we are just now beginning to recover. Our society is still crippled in many ways by this uncomfortable history.

THE RISE OF SEXISM

Studies in both mythology and anthropology show that mothers, not fathers, were the original authority figures in human societies. Paleolithic and neolithic humans were no more aware of fatherhood than any other primate species; the connection between sexual activity and conception was not understood until quite late in human history. Even in the 18th and 19th centuries, anthropologists and missionaries found primitive cultures where it was still not understood. Most early peoples attributed pregnancy to mysterious magic that made only females able to create life.

Thus the popular notion of "cave men" dominating women by physical strength is quite erroneous. Women were generally respected in primitive cultures. Musclemen don't rule, but rather serve the rulers. Social power comes not from physical strength but from psychological, emotional, and/or financial authority. Like all other mammals, early humans knew they owed their existence only to their mothers. As a Native American chieftain once explained, "Of course we listen to and obey the women. They are our mothers." Women usually owned the dwellings and property, created crafts and technical skills required to sustain the tribe, later including even the development of writing and math. According to Hindu scriptures, "male ancestors" believed that if they could learn how to measure and figure as the women did, then they might "happily create progeny."

Men did envy women's ability to produce and nourish new life, and wanted a part in it. In some South American tribes, during childbirth a woman's mate would lie down and moan and groan, pretending to produce the baby, and even pretended to nurse it afterward, recalling the Bible's rather absurd mention of a "suckling child" being nourished "in the bosom of Abraham." In the original baptism ceremony of ancient Egypt, a mother gave her child a name while anointing it with her milk. There was a strange recollection of this in the French term *nom de lait*, "milk name," meaning one given by the mother.

One fact about reproduction that was obvious to primitives was that, during pregnancy, women kept within their bodies that mysterious blood that was shed in harmony with the phases of the moon. Thus it seemed clear that menstrual blood was the substance of which babies were made. We still speak of "blood" relationships because of the classical belief that all tribes were made of what the Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, and

Romans called the mother's "heart's blood." Aristotle said every human life is made of a "coagulum" of menstrual blood. According to Pliny, each baby is formed of a "curd" of menstrual blood. Plutarch said the power that made a human body came from the moon, source of menstrual blood. Indians of South America said all humanity was made of "moon blood" in the beginning.

In ancient Mesopotamia, women practiced a standard conception charm, shaping babies of clay and anointing them with menstrual blood, to make a real baby by sympathetic magic. This charm was so widely used that the word *adamah*, literally "bloody clay", was basis of the name Adam, which Bible translators delicately re-rendered as "red earth." Hindu scriptures claim that the Goddess Kali made the world and all the gods from her "ocean of blood", (another version of the Red Sea). Chinese sages called menstrual blood the "red yin juice" that made all of life in the beginning.

Because of its wondrous power, menstrual blood was also regarded with holy dread. The Bible calls it "unclean," which is a vague mistranslation of the word meaning "taboo, sacred, untouchable." The Bible also calls it the "flower," meaning the forerunner of the "fruit" of the womb: i.e., a baby. In India, girls had a solemn ceremony at menarche, when they were said to have borne the "Kula flower," which united them to both ancestral traditions and the offspring of the future. Men came to fear this "flower" so much that during the Middle Ages, when patriarchy finally ruled supreme, menstruating women were forbidden to enter churches. It seemed that even God was unable to protect his belongings from "the curse." The same primitive fear still exists in Islam, where menstruating women are forbidden to enter a mosque.

Despite their fear, men often tried to imitate motherhood-magic by some form of genital bloodshed. Many are the myths of gods who were castrated or otherwise genitally mutilated to create life. The phallus of the Hindu Great God, Mahadeva, was removed so his blood could give birth to men. The Mexican savior Quetzalcoatl made new humans to repopulate the earth after the Flood, by cutting off his penis and giving the blood to the mother goddess Miti -- an obviously feeble attempt to prove that the god was the original source of the magic moon-blood. The Phoenician Father Heaven, Shamin, was castrated to produce the world's rivers from his blood. Many other gods claimed physical birth-giving powers through genital bloodletting.

Pubescent boys of the Arunta tribe suffered subincision, called "man's menstruation," and the wound was referred to as a vagina. In ancient Egypt, circumcision for the assurance of future fertility was practiced on 13-year-old boys, who were dressed in girls' clothing for the ceremony. The Jews copied circumcision from the Egyptians but transferred it to infancy, a practice objectionable to the women, according to the story of Moses's Midianite wife Zipporah, who opposed the mutilation of her infant. After the operation she flung the foreskin at Moses, calling him a bloody husband (Exodus 4). The ceremony for adolescents remained, however, and evolved into the bar mitzvah.

Observing that death meant no more breathing, some early peoples came up with the idea that breath was synonymous with soul. In early Hindu mythology, would-be father gods said a man must give the breath of life to each baby, so their custom maintained that a man had to make a "soul" in a newborn child by breathing into its face. This method of fathering was later adopted by the biblical God, who "breathed the breath of life" into the nostrils of Adam to make him a "living soul" (Gen. 2:7).

But the biblical description of God as "all that has been, that is, and that will be" was copied from an Egyptian inscription first applied to the Great Mother. It was written on her ancient temple at Sais, where she was also described as "the greatest power on earth, who existed when nothing else had being, who commandeth all that is in the universe."

Once fatherhood was discovered, patriarchal cultures began to insist on monogamy, so a man could be sure that every child came from his own "seed." The Bible is stuffed full of "begats," which never mention mothers; and it says over and over, "he went in unto her, and she conceived, and bare a child," to drive home the same message that the Christian church later insisted on: the soul of a baby comes not from the mother's "heart's blood," but from semen; and a mother's body is simply the inert soil in which the "seed" can grow. Of course the human ovum remained completely unknown until it was finally discovered by Edgar Allen in 1928.

Patriarchal religion brought about history's most radical changes in human social organization. Over the next millennia in many cultures, men became more warlike and aggressive; they claimed property rights and ancestral naming customs; they established male "blood" lines even when magical moon-blood was no longer involved. Judeo-Christian tradition

began to insist that all evil came from woman, due to the sin of Eve. St. Paul said, "Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was the transgressor" (1 Tim. 2:14), which seems to indicate that the real original sin was gullibility.

The Catholic doctrine of original sin was established by St. Augustine, who said the sin is transmitted to every child by its passage through the female body. Any male child that died before the requisite forty days before baptism would suffer forever in hell; and a female child could not even be brought into a church for eighty days. This cruel doctrine was not modified until the church relented enough to invent a Limbo for the innocent ones -- who still had to suffer a little, anyway.

In the apocryphal *Gospel According to the Egyptians*, Jesus says, "I have come to destroy the works of the female." Clement of Alexandria said "Every woman should be filled with shame." St. Peter said in the *Gospel of Thomas*, "Women are not worthy of life." St. Odo of Cluny wrote that a woman is only a "sack of dung." Bishop John Aylmer wrote in 1590: "Woman is the dregs of the devil's dung hill." The *Malleus Maleficarum*, handbook of the Inquisition, says "All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman."

St. Thomas Aquinas said every woman is defective from birth, begotten only because her father was ill or in a state of sin at the time of her conception, and she must be treated as "lower than a slave, wholly in subjection to her husband." Martin Luther considered himself an unusually kind husband because he didn't beat his wife with a stick, but only punched her in the head "to keep her from getting saucy." A 15th-century church publication on the Rules of Marriage said a husband should "soundly" beat his wife; it would redound to his credit in heaven.

In the 1890s the president of a leading theological seminary wrote "The Bible commands the subjection of women forever." A 19th-century document of the Anglican church said, "Women are intrinsically inferior in excellence, imbecile by sex and nature... and imperfect and infirm in character." Orestes Brownson opined that "Every woman must be under a man's control, otherwise she is... a social anomaly, sometimes a hideous monster, which men seldom are, except through a woman's influence." The Reverend Peter Easton declared the emancipated woman "an incarnate demon, a creature of unbounded lust and merciless cruelty." Quite recently, the Reverend Pat Robertson told women: "If you get

married, you have accepted the leadership of a man. The husband is the head of the wife, and that's the way it is, period."

The point is that over the centuries, the primary fountainhead of sexism in western civilization has been religion. It was religion that obliterated the mother goddess in favor of the father god. It was religion that transferred the supposed essence of human life from mother-blood to semen. It was religion that insisted on patriarchal rules of marriage and inheritance. It was religion that sanctioned abuse and enslavement of wives. It was religion that so despised women as to torture and burn more than nine million of them during five centuries of dominance by the Inquisition in Europe. It is religion that still supports sexist doctrines.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote: "The church has done more to degrade women than all other adverse influences together. Out of the doctrine of original sin grew the crimes and miseries of asceticism, celibacy, and witchcraft, woman becoming the helpless victim of all the delusions in the brain of man. There is nothing more pathetic in all history than the hopeless resignation of woman to the outrages she has been taught to believe are ordained by God."

Though many believers insist that God has no physical being, they fail to make the logical conclusion that "he" would lack the proper genitalia and hormones that define maleness. We do know from mythology that in Graeco-Roman times, gods routinely impregnated large numbers of virgins, even though non-physical beings would necessarily lack any form of spermatozoa. How exactly such an impregnation could happen has never been made clear, even though some sects continue to insist on it to this day.

In truth, however, our only proven source of life is Mother Earth, who is more than just an imaginary concept devoid of physical being. "She" symbolizes an essential reality: one that deserves much more of our attention, because our lives depend on it every day, and for all the foreseeable future.

A SCHOLARLY DEFINITION OF A CHRISTIAN

Churches tell people to believe in a male god who, though lacking anything like human spermatozoa, managed to impregnate a human female and have himself born in human form, in order to have himself killed to induce himself to forgive some but not all humans for committing the sins he knew they would commit because he made them that way, and although he claims to love them all, he has condemned most of them to eternal torture in the hell he created for the purpose. He also demanded that in order please him, people would have to kill each other in astonishing numbers through wars and crusades and pogroms and inquisitions and holocausts, even though his sacred books forbade killing, while also describing the constant killing that he ordered his followers to do, and did a lot of it himself. He also ruled that in order to please him best, people must give up most of the pleasures that his creation makes available to them, and even subject themselves to painful ones. He ordered people to resist innumerable temptations, while making them constitutionally unable to do so. Though claiming to be above petty egotism, he demands incessant praise night and day, and constant abjectly respectful credit for everything, everywhere, even though the world he claims to have created has both bad and good elements. By mistake, apparently, this allegedly infallible being created a devil who successfully opposes him, despite his equally allegedly almighty power to eliminate every kind of devilry. A Christian is one who has suppressed his own common sense enough believe all these absurdities, and may actively help in their continual promulgation, and who is sycophantic enough to define as "bliss" an eternity of singing praises to flatter the insatiable ego of this vain, cruel, jealous, erratic, amazingly vindictive deity who seems to embody the worst qualities of the human male. The grateful deceased thus takes part in a postmortem occupation that would normally entertain one for perhaps twenty minutes or a half hour, but which, extended into eternity, would constitute torture; yet this is considered something to look forward to, when in fact the total unconsciousness of our inevitable nonexistence is far more preferable.

ON ABORTION: WHY MEN SHOULD HAVE NO SAY

Matters of birth control and abortion should be controlled by women only, because only women can fully comprehend how motherhood radically alters a woman's life. The reasons behind this fact are not merely cultural or social. They come from a fundamental physical phenomenon that underlies the very process of evolution on this planet.

Growing up, I was never particularly drawn to babies. In some ways, I found them rather repellent. I thought puppies and kittens were much cuter and more cuddly. But during the process of giving birth, a complex cocktail of hormones (still not completely understood by medical science) so affected my body and brain that I instantly knew I would give my life to protect this odd little critter that I had never seen before that moment. The hormones not only bring on lactation and other bodily changes; they alter one's whole mentality.

It is said that women fall in love with their babies. The sensation is vaguely similar, but more sudden, more urgent, and probably more permanent. This is not a human phenomenon only. It is seen in every mammalian species and also in birds, some reptiles, and even lower animals. As surely as a spider knows how to create its web, a mother knows how to care for helpless offspring.

Males do not usually display similar behavior. In some species, males will even kill the offspring if the mother isn't around. The general rule is that males compete, females nurture. This works to improve the species, because only the stronger, healthier males get to breed after winning their rutting battles, or females choose the fitter males. That's why nature encourages males to strut and show off for potential mates.

In human terms, this also explains why patriarchal societies tend to become cruel and warlike. In making war, fathers are willing to sacrifice sons, as in the example of the father-god himself. But as a rule, mothers are not willing to sacrifice anyone's children, especially not their own. The prehistoric matriarchal societies were generally peaceful because the laws of moral right and wrong were made by the mothers.

Instinctual mothering behavior, even more than sexual behavior, is the fundamental root of ongoing evolution. Without its essential

assistance, there could be no life forms much higher than amoebas. The more evolved and complex the animal, the weaker and more helpless its young tend to be. Humans are weakest of all, requiring many years of nurture and training before they can even begin to fend for themselves.

The physical phenomenon is beyond the comprehension of men, even though they may enjoy fatherhood in a secondary sort of way. It means that giving birth causes a radical change in a woman's life, demanding a complete change in emotional and behavior patterns. Even if she doesn't keep the baby, she has been altered, and must overcome the feelings that are created by those hormones. If she does keep the baby, her whole lifestyle must change to accommodate new demands and responsibilities, which apply not just at the time of giving birth but for the rest of her life.

That is why the matter of abortion should belong to women only, and should never be dependent on any decisions of all-male groups of legislators. Patriarchal religious groups are particularly unsuitable, because of their radically misogynous history. Their deliberate insistence on the bearing of unwanted children was one more means of enslaving women, while increasing the population of their adherents. No man, but only a woman can decide whether she is physically, emotionally, and economically prepared to undertake this, the most basic and demanding role among life forms in general. We need to understand the primary importance of this role and its embodiment in the female sex alone. Only then can we make the right decisions.

GOD'S LIES

Nowadays, the more liberal sort of Christians and Jews tend to look tolerantly upon biblical improbabilities as mythological fables drawn from the nursery age of humankind, or even as obscure allegories. The original writers, however, had no such ideas. They obviously intended all their words to be taken as literal truth, directly provided by God, who couldn't lie.

Believers tend to disparage the confirmed existence of the same fables in other, older, heathen mythologies that the biblical writers plagiarized. Scholars know that the Old Testament patriarchs were mythical figures, with counterparts in Egypt, Babylon, Sumer, Greece, and India, and that the ancient middle east had literally dozens of god-begotten, virgin-born, dying-and-resurrecting messiahs and saviors. Traditional believers try to keep this information suppressed. They would like to maintain that all the other gods were mistakes, and only Yahweh still lives -- somewhere, if not in the sky anymore.

A surprising number of Christians still insist on the literal truth of biblical fables, even today when science has made it abundantly clear that there is no heaven in the sky, nor any hell underground; that the universe was not created 6,000 years ago; that there could never have been an Edenic garden or a Noah's ark or a flat earth, as the bible claims. Green plants could not exist before the sun, nor could days and nights consisting of mornings and evenings; and so on through hundreds of God's egregiously unscientific statements. Mythology taken as literal, historical truth is neither a fairy tale nor an allegory; it is a lie. And almost the entire content of the Judeo-Christian bible is a tissue of such lies.

Why are these products of primitive ignorance still being maintained, in a civilization with knowledge that easily disproves them? The answer has always been clear: for money. Rich, powerful institutions like churches have an insatiable desire for ever more of their tax-free money, and disproof of biblical lies may threaten their endless income. Thus, churches have been traditionally hostile to almost every scientific advance of the past three centuries. Many continue, against all reason, to deny rock-solid facts of geology, paleontology, physiology, cosmology and evolution. To such people, remaining determinedly unenlightened is the definition of faith. And from their authorities' point of view, that kind of faith is required for their

own continuing influx of money. Hence, congregations are deliberately trained to remain aggressively ignorant.

And what is the product that the faithful buy, with all their tithes, offerings, donations, and widows' mites? Simply, hot air. Early Christians, referring to their god as the Logos (the Word), spoke more truly than they knew -- because every god is made of nothing but words. Furthermore, most of the words are lies.

A god like the biblical one, telling crude, unsophisticated lies, is not really very credible. Therefore believers have come up with many excuses for him. Putting the fear of God into their flocks, God's shepherds insist that no one can dare to judge him. God's ways are inscrutable. No mere mortal can know the mind of God; even to presume an inkling thereof is a sin. But then they turn around and claim to know exactly what God wants (always, more money) and tell the sheep exactly how God wants them to behave, along with the shearing. It seems that God's inscrutability depends largely on who is doing the scrutinizing.

Many people deliberately ignore all questions about the authenticity of God or his cruder mistakes, fearful of offending their more pious neighbors, or of probing too deeply into their own doubts. They prefer to call themselves agnostic (by derivation, "no knowledge") rather than atheist ("no god"). They may even attend a church for social reasons, but seek to know little or nothing of their own sect's history or theological tenets.

Sometimes, the modern agnostics feel that, in the absence of hard evidence, the existence of God can't be clearly proved or disproved. Therefore they withhold judgment. But this is not as rational as it sounds. Lack of evidence is proof of nothing. One cannot disprove the existence of vampires, ghosts, elves, dragons, fairies, demons, or the Flying Spaghetti Monster; but that's no reason to believe in them. Gods are just as imaginary as any other allegedly supernatural being, and the burden of proof of their existence rests on the believer. To claim anything as a truth, when it is supported only by lies, is the very negation of logic.

Is it necessary, as is often claimed, to believe biblical lies in order to be a good person? Well, hardly. It has been demonstrated over and over that nonbelievers are usually generous, kind people, and the criminal population contains a greater percentage of believers. Perhaps the defining virtue of nonbelievers may be honesty. They don't like lies. They

don't want to be told lies. And they don't tell lies -- which may make them somewhat more admirable than the traditional God.

ABOUT NOAH:

What To Read To Your Friends Who Still Believe in the Ark

The earth has over six and a half million species of land animals, with more being discovered each year. Christian fundamentalists ask us to believe that because God was irritated by the behavior of a few humans, he decided to wipe out all the animals except a pair of each, to be put in a boat built by one man, Noah, assisted only by his family. Such a boat would require more wood than can be found in the whole Middle East. To accommodate the animals, plus their widely diverse foodstuffs for a five months' voyage, with extra meat animals to feed the carnivores, would require a (totally unfloatable) boat approximately the size of the state of California. Furthermore, the polar bears, kangaroos, Chinese pandas, American grizzlies, African gorillas, and other animals from far continents would have to make virtually impossible journeys of many years to get to the ark in the first place. The creationists would also have us believe that in addition to that group, Noah's ark would accommodate several thousand species of dinosaurs, which for some unknown reason God decided to eliminate once the flood was over.

This ridiculous legend is still taken literally by large numbers of people, who are quite unaware that it didn't even originate with the bible, but was copied from Babylonian sources (where the flood hero was named Uta-Napishtim) which were copied from Sumerian sources (where the flood hero was named Ziusudra) which also appeared in Greek tradition (where the flood hero was named Deucalion) left over from the earliest Indo-European traditions of world creation out of oceanic waters. Since the Tigris-Euphrates valley was always subject to disastrous floods at times, this was a legend that childlike ancient people could readily understand. However, it is long past time for enlightened modern grownups to know better and stop pretending "godly" absurdities.

WHY GOD EXISTS

It has been scientifically proven that humans evolved from earlier apelike forms by overdevelopment of the brain at the expense of the physical body. In the womb, physical growth of the fetus slows down at the period when brain growth is foremost. Thus, through a process called infantilization, humans are better able than other animals to think, to imagine, to create, to solve problems, to invent language for communication. However, humans have inferior senses and strength than other animals. The fittest human athlete has nowhere near the muscle power or the keen environmental awareness of the average of what we snobbishly call the "lower" animals.

As a result of this infantilizing process, humans are born much more helpless than other creatures. Human babies can't get themselves to the teat for milk, as other infant mammals can; they must be picked up and carried and cared for, all day, every day, for many months. During this time the brain takes in a huge amount of knowledge while the body lags. What the human infant experiences before and above everything else is its own utter helplessness, the need to be cared for by a giant being, much stronger and wiser, who voluntarily supplies all the infant's needs: the mother. The infant has a primal, inborn need for her nurturing touch. Being fed and hugged and rocked into soothing sleep is the first experience of bliss.

That deepest, most essential feeling of utter dependence naturally affects the human psyche, that keen creator of answers to our questions. It inevitably creates humankind's first deity, the Great Mother, who supposedly created everything and supplies everything and loves her earthly children and teaches them the basics of behavior. To follow her instruction is natural, to disobey her might prove dangerous and is a sin. Language makes it possible to transmit her description throughout the community, and to create methods of worship that presumably communicate with her and ensure her goodwill.

It is that bone-deep feeling of helplessness that is never quite outgrown, affecting a majority of human beings throughout our history, and making ever more elaborate images of a presumed spirit world of superior intelligence, ready to hear prayers and watch over us. When fatherhood was finally recognized and father gods were created, the same

characteristics persisted, though the father god tended to be more strict and his punishments more terrible: for what could be more appalling than the eternity of torture that the patriarchal priesthood invented? They finally managed to eliminate the mother goddesses as "pagan", to destroy or appropriate their temples, to murder their priestesses as "witches", and to overturn female ownership of property and family names, though the process took many centuries.

Now we have a paternal god who claims to be the sole source of everything and serves as the single authority figure that our infantilization needs to envision, embodying a promise of eternal bliss. But for those of us who have outgrown this imaginative/emotional dependence, he is obviously as ridiculous as all the numerous deities of the past, or the other supernaturals we have invented: fairies, gnomes, vampires, ghosts, angels, demons, dragons, giants, werewolves, elves, or monsters. He has no other substance than our hot air (language), and serves mainly to make unbelievable amounts of money for the organizations that continue to reinforce his image. The childlike souls in our majority keep him going, and it is the perfect scam: getting rich by making promises that never have to be kept.

WHY RELIGION EXISTS

Religion, or its counterpart superstition, has been the creation of human minds since the beginning of the species. The psychological reason for this is that humans share with all other mammals the instinctive reliance on the parent (i.e., mother) to protect and teach the young. Most mammalian fathers take no part in this; they simply obey their instinct to beget in the mating season, then go their ways. This is a system that works well, because it encourages genetic variety. Among birds, there are some types that mate for life, but this is much more rarely seen in mammals.

Human babies are the most helpless of all living creatures, and they know it. They need a being who is bigger, stronger, and wiser to take care of their every need, and to teach them what to do and what not to do in order to stay alive. This is always the mother, so it's not remarkable that early Stone Age people invented the all-powerful Mother Goddess to listen to their pleas and teach them right from wrong. The connection between sexuality and fatherhood was not recognized until late in human history. Earlier cultures taught that mothers created their children out of their own blood, which remained nine months in the womb for that purpose, instead of emerging in harmony with the phases of the moon. Some thought women could bring this about by certain magical charms, or eating something special, or performing some kind of ritual. Early versions of the family consisted of mothers and their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren through the generations. Fathers were not "blood" relations but something like in-laws if they joined the family. Grandmothers were considered founts of wisdom and often controlled cultural behavior generally.

All this changed when fatherhood began to be recognized. The world in which the Judeo-Christian bible was written was a world in which all-powerful Mother Goddesses still existed, but men, longing to be honored as child-creators too, began to insist on the magical importance of semen. The bible says over and over, "He went in unto her, and she conceived, and bare a child," making this sequence of events crystal clear. The Catholic church taught from its very beginning that the soul of the unborn child is located in male "seed," and the mother is just "earth" in which the seed can grow. Thus began serious patriarchy, which sought to destroy the Mother Goddesses by declaring them evil, and put father gods in charge.

Bible writers gave endless lists of "begats" to chart male ancestry. Mothers were not mentioned.

People came to depend on "sacred texts" to explain the universe, which was not really understood at all by their writers. Even though such texts, like the Christian bible, have undergone extensive revisions and re-interpretations to make them appear more plausible, they are still filled with lies, fraud, and impossible "miracles" which followers are ordered to believe against every aspect of common sense. Disbelief in the claims of "sacred" nonsense was declared a sin, often subject to unbearable tortures both in life and after death.

But patriarchy wasn't recognized all over the world at once. Gods and Goddesses coexisted for a very long time in classical and pre-Renaissance Europe, not to mention other areas around the world. Even as late as the nineteenth century, missionaries and explorers found primitive people who still didn't understand fatherhood. Of course, missionaries immediately set out to correct such "devilish" beliefs, institute a patriarchal lifestyle, and tout the soul-magic of male "seed". They were empowered by the fact that the human ovum was not discovered until the year 1928.

Why have all these imaginary beings and their preposterous pseudo-histories remained indestructible for so many centuries, up to and including the modern "scientific" era? The answer lies in the very nature of human psychology. Apparently a majority of people never really outgrow the deep, instinctive consciousness of dependency and helplessness that exists in babyhood. They want an all-powerful authority to replace the mammalian mother's natural ability to teach them right from wrong, to care for them, love them, and even promise them eternal happiness in an after-life, in spite of the obvious fact that all living things die. Father gods could make this promise, and at the same time threaten the most cruel idea ever devised: unending torture for all eternity, even though there is no longer any body with nerves to feel pain. Such unlikely beliefs are instilled in childhood, reinforced by fear and by religious practices that are made an intrinsic part of life, so only those few who manage to overcome such brainwashing will become true grownups.

The advancement of science has helped. We now have rational explanations of many formerly unknown natural phenomena that were attributed to divine intervention. We also know more about human

psychology and its weaknesses. In order to maintain religious faith, many people must earnestly ignore or deny much that modern educators have learned. Churches do their best to maintain such ignorance. In a way, they counsel "be a baby all your life." But science continues to show progress toward psychological adulthood and realization of the damage that patriarchal religion has done, such as super-sadistic inquisitions, condemnation of birth control, institution of wife abuse, harsh punishments for children with consequent emotional problems in later life, and many other evils. The gods gave lip service to "love" but rarely showed any real practice of it. Modern decline of dependence on such brutal, money-hungry institutions may indeed lead us eventually to a system of true care for the earth and its creatures, and a new freedom for the human mind. But it will take a long time for the majority of people to recognize that religion, the world's wealthiest institution, earns its fortunes by making after-life promises that it never has to keep; therefore it qualifies as the world's greatest scam.

THE GREATEST SCAM

Religion is the world's oldest, richest, most elaborate, and by far the most successful scam ever perpetrated. It is the work of very wealthy organizations dedicated to continuing their acquisition of tax-free assets, to support millions of dependent employees, and to maintain a show of impeccable respectability. For these purposes, theologians are forever trying to fine-tune their basically ridiculous doctrines, to force them into seeming to make some kind of sense.

For just one example: the words *above* and *below* used to be the normal synonyms for heaven and hell. Everybody knew automatically that heaven was located in the sky, and hell was underground. But in modern times we now know the limits of the earth's atmosphere, and that there is nothing beyond it but empty space; we also know what lies below the earth's crust. So the theologians can no longer speak of a god or angels or deceased loved ones "looking down", nor can they picture bad people writhing around in molten lava. So they are at taking pains to deny and redefine these physical locations, and finding it difficult to do. Although no one can say anymore exactly where the ghosts go, religious shills still try to maintain the basic concept, to perpetuate the scam.

They know that this scam is best instilled in its victims from their early childhood, to present them with a make-believe parental authority figure that will override and outlive real parents. They seek to impose a system of daily and seasonal reminders and habitual connections to every important occasion in life: birth, maturity, marriage, death. They know that when such habits are fully installed, the victims be hesitant to criticize them, and will go to great lengths to continue believing that, after death, they will be able to see without eyes, hear without ears, feel without nerves, think without a brain, and that if they behave they will be able to subject this ongoing consciousness to a transcendent happiness.

But the downside is the most sadistic threat ever conceived, eternal torture that can somehow be felt by those nonexistent nerves: a threat so severe as to terrify the gullible into compliance with all the money-making demands imposed on them. They are targets of the world's most successful scam, which charges high prices for its promised nonproduct, which never has to be delivered because it consists of nothing but hot air.

Making promises that you never have to fulfill, brainwashing the marks so they never rebel, earning huge sums on false pretenses that you never have to justify, and keeping this scam operational for many centuries in many nations: how could it be any more successful?

We are still being exposed to religion as part of our daily language and seasonal calendar. It is a shamelessly overt kind of scam that those of us who can perceive its falseness are still expected to tolerate. So we are still being taught mythology in the guise of history, avarice masquerading as benevolence, and lies masquerading as truth.

The real downside, of course, is that over the centuries religion has developed truly evil and destructive ways of maintaining itself against rivals, unbelievers, or scientific facts. It has instituted wars, inquisitions, holocausts and hideous oppressions. It has denied observable truths and set itself against scientific knowledge of our world. Its only answer to the doubters is still "you must have faith" because it is evil to ask questions. The real evil is that questions that can't be reasonably answered must never be spoken or heard.

Secular leaders and politicians have always gone along, either because they are suitably brainwashed themselves, or because they dare not oppose that much money and influence. Under the rule long since laid down in Europe by the Roman Catholic organization, every church member must contribute a mandatory ten percent of all his or her earnings to the church, which in turn never needs to pay any taxes to support the government-funded infrastructure on which it freely feeds.

Perhaps we can hope that in a more scientifically enlightened future the world will finally turn against this scam, and give humanity a more rational and peaceful world, without any threatening All-father to terrify them or any absurdly questionable hopes to close their minds. But that is still far off. Let us do what we can in our own lifetimes to bring it a little bit closer.

RELIGION VERSUS PEACE

It is very unlikely that there will ever be real peace in the world as long as religion exists. Religion by its very nature is confrontational and contentious, dividing the "ins" from the "outs", the "we" from the "they", and the "saved" from the "damned" in arbitrary ways that require a non-questioning faith.

For one thing, major religions today insist that divinity is male. No supreme mother symbol, no hint of female sexuality is allowed. The absurdity of this belief is emphasized by the simultaneous notion that this manlike God has no physical body, which means "he" is without any of the kind of genitalia or hormones that define maleness. "His" (nonphysical) form is also seen as exclusively human, a dead giveaway of the fact that God is strictly man-created, a glorification of man's self-image and egotistical dreams of constant praise, power, and authority.

For another thing, religion tends to divide the world into warring factions: the in-group versus everyone else, the saved versus the damned. It caters to the human desire for special significance in a universe that is quite obviously indifferent to what humans think of it, one way or another. It condemns the nonbeliever to that concept of ultimate sadism, hell, and likewise to earthly horrors typified by crusades, holocausts, pogroms, inquisitions, holy wars, shunnings, witch hunts, condemnations, physical and social punishments, and intolerance of every conceivable kind. Religion says, basically, "If you don't believe what I believe, then you are devilishly deluded, and my God declares you evil and worthless; he orders your persecution." This is the basic attitude of fundamentalists everywhere.

Throughout history, religion has enabled men to put down women and subject them to truly horrendous forms of abuse. It has enabled "civilized" conquerors to wipe out whole populations of "pagan" tribes throughout the world. It has attacked and robbed and enslaved, rather than enlightened. Indeed, knowledge is religion's traditional enemy. Knowing the truth behind natural or social phenomena almost always contradicts the tenets of faith. Even in a scientifically enlightened age, religion still insists on belief in the patently unbelievable.

Religious leaders forbid their congregants to engage in discussions with nonbelievers, on pain of invoking God's nastiest forms of displeasure. There is a quite justifiable fear that such discussions might lead to rational doubts and serious questioning of creedal improbabilities. Religions can't abide research; that's why they insist on being taken "on faith" and never investigated.

For these and many related reasons, it seems clear that the world will never be mentally or emotionally free, or at peace, until religion has disappeared and been replaced by real knowledge, genuine sympathies, and true heartfelt humanity that respects all of our fellow creatures. We don't deserve to be locked into mutually exclusive categories of belief any longer. They are destructive and dangerous. We need to teach our children and our children's children to understand mythologies but not to subscribe to them; to seek real knowledge rather than belief systems; and to realize that only the absence of religion will ever really bring about world peace.

RELIGION AND WAR

Scholars say that before the rise of patriarchal religions, human beings lived fairly peaceably in kinship-based communities under matriarchs who established a more tolerant morality than the later, father-worshipping kind. It is sometimes claimed that warlike violence and hostility exist in human societies as a "natural" result of testosterone-driven aggression. However, men in earlier matrist cultures were certainly no less masculine; they were simply less violent. The determinant was not physiology but socialization: nurture, not nature.

Pre-patriarchal cultures were very indulgent of their children, giving them much physical affection and little punishment. They also tended to be permissive about physical pleasures and sexuality. There were no homosexuality taboos, no concubinage, no prostitution. The sexes had equal status although the families were matrilineal and matrilocal. Most property was owned by the women, whose life-giving magic was considered essential to fertility in general. Descent was reckoned only through mothers, among people who had not yet understood biological fatherhood. There was no caste system and no full-time military. Religion was some variant of nature worship with no strict codes, a Mother Goddess being primary and her consorts secondary. Such cultures were generally nonviolent and valued spontaneity, humor, and sensual enjoyments. (1)

Even in our own culture, where violence is presented to us every day in sports, movies, television, and even children's games, there are both men and women whose nature fends it off. Nevertheless, we do have organized and institutionalized violence that can sweep up even those who are naturally peaceable, and that can destroy huge numbers of our fellow humans. We call it war.

There has never been a war that religion did not support. As a rule, religious authorities on both sides assure their followers that God is on their side and the other side is motivated by the powers of evil. Whatever sacrifices one has to make will be welcomed by the Almighty and redound to one's post-mortem credit. People are usually forbidden to doubt this. And the troops who are actively engaged in killing the enemy are always accompanied by supportive clergy, even when the clergy claim to be dedicated to a God who says "Thou shalt not kill." It is said that there are

no atheists in foxholes. But there can be no Christians or Jews in foxholes either, if they truly believe in this particular word of God.

The clergy are supposed to minister to the spiritual needs of the troops, which frequently means absolution from any guilt they may feel about killing. God's pacifistic command is ignored -- indeed, he ignored it himself just a few biblical chapters later, ordering the slaughter of many thousands of men, women, children, and animals, the total destruction of many cities, the incessant rape, looting, and other violence.

Those who are to be destroyed are always viewed as enemies of God, and "his" people are told that they must go to war and exterminate these enemies. It is never mentioned what it is exactly that God fears these enemies will do to him. And somehow, despite being allegedly almighty, God is powerless to do it for himself, and so his human minions have to do it for him. Also not mentioned (except in the bible) are all the more attractive acquisitions that the attacks make possible: more property, loot, girls to rape, feelings of power, emotional satisfactions of a sadistic nature -- although the leaders themselves may be well aware of these more practical aims even as they tell the troops that God wants them to satisfy their blood-lust.

Sam Harris points out that "most people of faith are perfectly sane, even those who commit atrocities on account of their beliefs. But what is the difference between a man who believes that God will reward him with seventy-two virgins if he kills a score of Jewish teenagers, and one who believes that creatures from Alpha Centauri are beaming him messages of world peace through his hair dryer?... Religious unreason remains among the principal causes of armed conflict in our world. Before you can get to the end of this paragraph, another person will probably die because of what someone else believes about God.... As long as it is acceptable for a person to believe that he knows how God wants everyone on earth to live, we will continue to murder one another on account of our myths." (2)

Charles Kimball, a Baptist minister and university professor of religious studies, writes: "More wars have been waged, more people killed, and more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history. The sad truth continues in our present day....[Christianity and Islam] have a long and checkered history in which their respective adherents fought for causes declared holy... they head the

list of those who have corrupted the heart of their religion by linking it confidently to war."

Centuries ago, the Roman philosopher Seneca wrote: "Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful." One reason why religious improbabilities continue to be taught as truths is that, through the ages, rulers have preferred to make useful alliances with clergy as advocates of blind faith and unquestioning obedience. As Thomas Jefferson wrote: "In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty; he is always in alliance with the despot." (3)

Actually, religious authorities have realized in their ever-practical way that the true aim of war is profit, in which they will partake. According to General Smedley Butler, "War is a racket; possibly the oldest, easily the most profitable, surely the most vicious. Out of war a few people make huge fortunes. Nations acquire additional territory (which is promptly exploited by the few for their own benefit), and the general public shoulders the bill -- a bill that renders a horrible accounting of newly placed gravestones, mangled bodies, shattered minds, broken hearts and homes, economic instability (sic), and back-breaking taxation of the many for generations." (4)

Islam, now claiming to be a religion of peace, was promulgated entirely by war, beginning in the 6th century. And Christianity, also claiming to be a religion of peace, was spread throughout Europe by the sword over the course of twelve centuries, during a Dark Age brought on by the church's destruction of schools and libraries, and the advocacy of bloody crusades against all dissenting tribes or nations.

Woodrow Wilson said, "Once lead people into war and they'll forget there ever was such a thing as tolerance. To fight, you must be brutal and ruthless and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fiber of our national life, infecting Congress, the courts, the policeman on the beat, the man in the street." Wilson said this only five days before asking Congress to declare war on Germany in 1917. (5)

In recent times we have seen the triumph of despotism within Western culture as the Holocaust, and history's most extensive war so far, ruined or destroyed millions of lives. Contributing hatreds and aggressions were built up through European religion with centuries of crusades,

pogroms, and persecutions, institutionalized by the Inquisition and many so-called "holy wars."

Concerning the Jews, Martin Luther wrote: "Set fire to their synagogues, destroy their houses, drive them from the country, kill them... the civil sword must be red and bloody." He claimed to be speaking for God. Similarly, Kaiser Willhelm II said, "The German people are the chosen of God. On me the spirit of God has descended. I am his sword, his weapon, his vice-regent." Hitler carried on the tradition by saying, "I am acting in the sense of the almighty creator. By warding off the Jews, I am fighting for the Lord's work." *Gott mit uns*, Hitler said: "God is with us." And so says every war leader throughout history. Pope Pius XII was wholeheartedly behind the Axis powers. He referred to Mussolini as "a gift from Providence." Europe's persecution of Jews was encouraged for many centuries on the specious ground that they (or their ancestors) were the killers of Christ. Somehow, religious authorities failed to notice that Christ's death sentence was originally pronounced not by the Jews but by God, as part of his peculiar filicidal plan of salvation.

Atrocities can always be excused by religion. Sadistic behaviors are excused when the victims are presumed theologically wrong. Mark Twain said, "Man is the only animal that loves his neighbor as himself, but cuts his neighbor's throat if his theology isn't straight." As Blaise Pascal remarked, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities. Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction." (6)

The underlying principle of monotheism is that only one god is right, and all others are wrong. From this it is a short step to the belief that any dissenting opinion is evil and its advocates must be eliminated from a righteous community. Hence, intolerance is intrinsic to monotheism. The biblical god, for example, declared all other deities demonic, and that kind of exclusivity has been handed down in Western culture for two millennia. It is the basis for our dismal historical record of religious persecution and warfare.

Persecution seems to be an inevitable result of patriarchization in human societies. Dr. James DeMeo, in his book *Sahasia: The 4000 BCE Origins of Child Abuse, Sex Repression, Warfare and Social Violence in the Deserts of the Old World*, sums up the character of patriarchal societies as follows: children are severely treated, with harsh physical punishments,

restriction of movement, and painful initiations including genital mutilation. Sexual attitudes are highly restrictive, ascetic, and fearful. Women's freedoms are limited and their status inferior. Patrilocal and patrilineal marriages are arranged by others, and frequently imply sexual and reproductive slavery for wives and/or concubines. Heavy taboos surround menstruation, childbirth, abortion, birth control, and women's access to spiritual matters. There are full-time male clergies and military establishments, with a father god often depicted as rigid, demanding, and cruel. Pain-seeking asceticism and renunciation of sexuality tend to please him. There are tight caste systems and strict codes with sadistic punishments, which may be used as spectacles of public entertainment. Men own property, women, and children, and may regard war as their most honorable calling. Though slavery and torture are permitted and may be freely discussed, physical pleasures and sensuality are viewed with puritanical anxiety and may incur verbal taboos. We can recognize some of these characteristics in our own society, especially before the so-called age of enlightenment.

The central holy image of Christianity is that of a man dying in agony. Is that an appropriate image for children? When I was a child in Sunday school, I was told that Jesus died for my sins, and I was horrified. To be made responsible for someone else's torture was a ghastly thought for me. (I also wondered, if Jesus died to save everybody from hell, how come people were still going to hell?)

There is an undisguised sadism in Christianity's visions of hell, which serve the faithful as imaginary punishment for those who don't share their beliefs. We may talk of tolerance and goodwill toward those of other faiths, but it's merely lip service if we enjoy picturing their eternal agony for the crime of disagreeing with us. Arthur Schlesinger wrote: "Those who are convinced that they have a monopoly on the truth always feel they are saving the world when they slaughter the heretics." Why is this? Perhaps there is a secret doubt in the mind of the believer, which can only be exorcised by violence, real or imagined.

Throughout history, heretics have been accused of "ungodding God," or "robbing God of his glory," or "debasing the Almighty," or "dishonoring God," or "deposing God's majesty." Such phrases seem to indicate a very vulnerable God indeed, easily belittled by mere humans. Are religious authorities here admitting, in effect, that the object of their worship is simply a verbal construct?

The 5th-century pope Leo the Great endorsed the death penalty for what he called "erroneous beliefs." The 10th-century pope Urban II said all heretics must be tortured and killed. Pope Innocent III stated that anyone whose view of God differs from that of the Catholic Church "must be burned without pity." The 16th-century pope Gregory XIII once congratulated the Inquisition's soldiers on their slaughter of 10,000 French Protestant "heretics." In colonial America, the Capital Laws of the Massachusetts Bay Colony ordered the death penalty for "worshiping any god other than the Lord God."

Such violence may be latent in a country like the United States, whose laws protect "freedom of religion." But fundamentalist rhetoric still threatens violence, in both Christianity and Islam. Muslim forces in the middle east are told that they are fighting a holy war against the invading armies of the Great Satan. And with the exception of the Quakers, most American believers were, and are, willing to go to war and kill people whenever their rulers order them to do so.

American politicians have invented many patriotic euphemisms to encourage willing participation in the violence of war, by calling it something else: police action, armed incursion, protective reaction strikes, pacification (!) safeguarding American interests, and many "operations," such as Operation Just Cause. Nearly always, it is described as defense rather than aggression: an example of reinventions of language for political purposes. As Talleyrand said, "An important art of politicians is to find new names for institutions which under old names have become odious to the public." (7)

It is hard to get much more absolute than the slogan "My country right or wrong," which commits you to kill whomever the politicians might choose to call enemies. Once war is declared, patriotism takes on the same power as religion, and justifies any violence, without limit. As Voltaire put it, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities." (8)

Salman Rushdie put it like this: "How well, with what fatal results, religion erects totems, and how willing we are to kill for them! And when we've done it often enough, the deadening of affect that results makes it easier to do again. The problem's name is God." Even if religion never did any other harm (which is by no means evident), its carefully nurtured

divisiveness has caused more human misery than anything else in all the world's cultures.

Those Americans who embrace religious pluralism face a dilemma. To what extent do we tolerate the intolerant? Should we give recognition to a faith that validates persecution or war? To what extent should we endorse our country's right to destroy and kill? Should we rebel against such national policy, or maintain a discreet silence and go on supporting it with our taxes? Should we personally renounce the right of fundamentalist religions to preach intolerance, bigotry, and their scary doctrines of damnation, to imbue their children with fantasies of eternal torment at the hands of terrifying demons?

Most citizens seem to agree with the expedient principle of "Don't make waves." Naturally, this is the safest course, but does it do any damage to our consciences? If we take the easy way out and refrain from making waves, remaining quiet in our comfortable middleground, we must at least recognize that we are doing so.

Most of us are friendly, tolerant, good citizens, kindly neighbors. So are most people in other religious traditions. But all over the world, rulers continue to use religion to support killing and destruction, to extend their own power over their fellow humans. Will this ever change? Could we become agents of that change?

Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, said in 1892: "Perhaps my dynamite plants will put an end to war sooner than your pacifist congresses. On the day when two army corps can annihilate each other in one second, all civilized nations will recoil from war in horror." (9) Alas, what would he think of us in the era of nuclear bombs?

A nation that harbors a huge, expensive war machine must employ the machine by creating wars, and must maintain a relatively unthinking public willing to support the military behemoth when fed buzzwords like "God and Country." Hate-the-enemy propaganda is combined with promises of some kind of apotheosis -- medals, adulation of heroes, elaborate honors for the dead, assurances of paradise, or sexy houris (in the Muslim view) -- to make the young willing, or even eager, to throw away their lives for somebody else's economic benefit. It is essential that the young be trained as killing-robots, expendable and replaceable parts of the machine.

The ultimate goal of any war is not World Peace, Freedom, Democracy, Fatherland, National Defense, or any other energizing buzzword. It is always economic aggrandizement: plain and simple greed. Wars are undertaken because the leaders want to seize an economic advantage from somebody else, and the somebody else doesn't want to give it up.

"Powers that be" are perfectly content to let their constituents become intellectually lazy, naive, ignorant and superstitious. It is not to any government's advantage to have a savvy, thoughtful, rational public. Governments want technological expertise, sure, but they don't want critical thinking to go along with it.

Fundamentalist and anti-intellectual trends in society are regarded with favor by warmakers, since war machines have no place for eggheads. The young are their fodder: the younger the better. We may despise Muslims for putting guns into the hands of thirteen-year-olds and teaching them to kill; but we seem to think it's all right for those who are just five years older. Any teenager is likely to be thrilled by being able to claim an adult-sized destructive power, and unlikely to be able to form any clear perception of his own physical vulnerability. Do not most of us, before we actually come of age, somehow believe that we can survive even the riskiest of situations?

Religion serves the military establishment in a number of important ways. Religious authorities firmly support their country's wars even if they call their deity "Prince of Peace." (After all, Jesus did say that he brought "not peace, but a sword" [Matthew 10:34] and history has proved it so.) Religion encourages childlike obedience and dependency on the father-figures represented by the chain of command, culminating in generals, national leaders, and ultimately God. Religion evokes the Big Daddy's rage against those who don't worship him correctly, and gives permission to kill them. Religion preaches unquestioning faith in the establishment, in doing what one is told without hesitation, and in the rightness of punishment for going against orders. Religion also encourages belief in an after-life to allay the natural fear of death that makes all other creatures flee from danger. Inexplicably, for many people even the fear of hell is preferable to their fear of permanent nonexistence.

Militaristic societies like the expression "There are no atheists in foxholes," though it is not a statement of fact, but an earnest wish on the part of the leaders. Atheists are not wanted in foxholes. Without Big Daddy's orders to keep them in place, they might even prefer being a live coward to being a dead hero. By all means let the troops pray while the bombs are bursting around them: if they survive, they can thank God, and if they don't, then their families can be comforted by the assurance (with appropriate crocodile tears) that it was God's will, and that is always a mystery. Nobody notices that it was the will of the government more than that of God. Nor do we notice that God professes to find human life so precious as to forbid the destruction even of an unwanted fetus, since that decision would be made by a woman and not by a government. Religion thus condones even the most obvious hypocrisy.

So the dumbing down of America is by no means deplored by all of America's leaders, religious or otherwise. Dumb means malleable. Those who don't think too much are more easily brainwashed, and perhaps more in need of an imaginary parental authority to tell them what is right (our way) and what is wrong (the other way), because it's too much trouble to figure it out for themselves. As long as there are religious differences of opinion, there will be wars; and as long as there are wars, religions will conspire to keep the populace suitably naive, ignorant and superstitious.

What gullible, malleable puppets we all are, when it comes to propaganda! In what many claim is a "Christian" country, most people grow up learning "Thou shalt not kill;" learning empathy, being trained not to injure others -- on pain of risking hell, or at least the displeasure of God. We are taught good manners, thoughtfulness, tolerance. Then along comes a war, and it's all abruptly reversed. God suddenly says thou shalt kill. Those who dare to threaten our economic comfort are all subhumans and deserve killing. What, all of them? The women and children, the innocent ones too? Yes. All of them. And the nation, mindlessly obedient, "supports the troops" that make it so.

It has been asked, what if they gave a war and no one came? But we have a vast propaganda machine standing ready to insure attendance at whatever killing spree our government fancies. We are given a plethora of reasons to reverse all the care-for-other-humans training. God may still insist on the survival of every fetus, but he has no problem with the deliberate destruction of thousands, even millions of fully developed lives.

God is ever and always the compliant tool of politicians; it's no wonder that they are usually at pains to claim belief in him.

As a precept, "Thou shalt not kill" didn't even last two chapters' worth in the Bible. The biblical God orders his chosen people to kill huge numbers of their fellow humans: ten thousand here, twenty thousand there, whole cities wiped out, every infant and suckling and animal destroyed, collectively adding up to a matter of millions. If there is any historical truth at all behind Bible mythology, it is this: the God our politicians claim to believe in is a bloodthirsty monster who not only condones war but actually commands it as the primary means of increasing temporal power. Even Hitler said that God was on his side, and so did every other war leader in the long and bloody history of Western civilization.

Andy Rooney pointed out that "The Pope traditionally prays for peace every Easter and the fact that it has never had any effect whatsoever in preventing or ending a war never deters him. What goes through the Pope's mind about being rejected all the time? Does God have it in for him?" (10)

Ranke-Heinemann asks, why doesn't the Catholic Church "forbid war just as emphatically as it forbids birth control? Why does Catholic morality occasionally embellish war, but never contraception, with the adjective 'just'? Doesn't the Church seem to have gotten its values mixed up? If one makes a decision for children, one must also decide against war. Otherwise one is deciding for cannon fodder." (11)

Perhaps one answer is that war is profitable, and birth control is not.

The current thinking on war prevention seems to be that stockpiling weapons of world destruction will keep everybody safe because no one would dare to use them. But if the doomsday threat is a serious threat, then we must be willing to use it, which means we should actually have plans to do what we must never do: a paradox that would be silly if it were not so unimaginably dangerous.

"We all want a peaceful, warless world but we haven't the faintest idea of how to achieve it...We don't approve of killing, yet we train millions to kill, and if one kills sufficiently he becomes a national hero, and we are proud of him... we are proud only because we haven't sense enough to be ashamed. We would rid the world of religious bigotry and prejudice, then

passionately defend their source, religion. This, we've been told, is the one great binding force in all the world -- Catholic against Protestant, Arab against Israeli, Mohammedan against Hindu. Thus instead of binding us together it makes killers of us. Throughout its history it has caused the death of untold millions." (12) Sam Harris notes that "as long as it is acceptable for a person to believe that he knows how God wants everyone on earth to live, we will continue to murder one another on account of our myths. (13)

Male religious authorities have always talked peace but waged war, for reasons that may be concealed in the very essence of patriarchal religions. Lewis Mumford says, "If anything were needed to make the magical origins of war plausible, it is the fact that war, even when disguised by seemingly hardheaded economic demands, uniformly turns into a religious performance; nothing less than a wholesale ritual sacrifice. As the central agent in this sacrifice, the ruler had from the beginning an office to perform. To accumulate power, to hold power, to express power by deliberate acts of murderous destruction -- this becomes the constant expression of rulership." (14)

And Thomas Jefferson put it in no uncertain terms: "On the dogmas of religion, as distinguished from moral principles, all mankind, from the beginning of the world to this day, have been quarreling, fighting, burning and torturing one another, for abstractions unintelligible to themselves and to all others, and absolutely beyond the comprehension of the human mind." (15)

Apparently we cannot imagine an end to warfare until we can, as John Lennon suggested, "Imagine no religion."

INQUISITION AND RELIGIOUS SADISM

Torture was officially sanctioned by the Inquisition in 1257 and remained a legal recourse of the church for five and a half centuries. The victims in those centuries were literally countless. The chronicler of Treves reported that in 1586, the entire female population of two villages was wiped out by the inquisitors. Two other villages were destroyed completely and erased from the map. A hundred and thirty-three persons were burned in a single day at Quedlinburg in 1589. Henri Boguet said Germany in 1590 was "almost entirely occupied with building fires for witches, and Switzerland has been compelled to wipe out many of her villages on their account. Travelers in Lorraine may see thousands and thousands of the stakes to which witches are bound."

In 1524, one thousand witches died at Como. Strasbourg burned five thousand in a period of 20 years. Savoy condemned 800 witches at one time. Parame stated that over thirty thousand were executed in the 15th century. Nicholas Remy said he personally sentenced 900 witches in 15 years, and in one year alone forced sixteen witches to suicide. A bishop of Bamberg claimed 600 witches in 10 years; a bishop of Nancy, 800 in 16 years; a bishop of Wurtzburg, 1,900 in 5 years. Five hundred were executed within three months at Geneva and 400 in a single day at Toulouse. The city of Treves burned 7,000 witches. The Lutheran prelate Benedict Carpzov sentenced 20,000 devil-worshippers. Even relatively permissive England killed 30,000 witches between 1542 and 1736. The slaughter went on throughout Christian Europe for nearly five centuries, even though the so-called crime was purely imaginary.

Mass burnings on the Iberian peninsula (autos-da-fe) were held once a month on the average, usually on a Sunday or holiday so all could attend. Execution fires were usually kept low, to prolong the suffering. A visitor to Wolfenbuttel, Germany, in 1590 observed that there were so many stakes to burn the witches that the place of execution resembled a small forest. The executioner of Neisse in Silesia invented an oven in which he roasted to death 42 women and young girls in one year. Within 9 years he had roasted over a thousand persons, including children two to four years old.

Of all the world's religions, Christianity was the most fundamentally sadistic. Its central icon was that of a dying man attached to an instrument of torture, and worshippers were constantly encouraged to envision his

agony. Physical pleasures, on the other hand, were condemned as evil. Spouses were told that sexual activities must not be practiced for pleasure, only for reproduction. Priests, nuns, monks, and holy ascetics were sworn to lifelong celibacy. Masturbation was severely punished. Wet dreams were said to be caused by female devils called succubi, who were thus stealing men's souls. Clergymen taught that children should be denied excessive enjoyment of ordinary pleasures like food treats or play, and advocated painful physical punishments for misbehavior.

They also encouraged husbands to beat their wives, since Eve's original sin sullied all women, who must be harshly restrained. The official manual of the Inquisition, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, said "all wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman," and witches must be "often and frequently exposed to torture." Although the rule said torture was to be applied "only once," that once could be "continued" for weeks or months.

The agonies of hell were constantly described, and, like other lies repeated often enough, became "truth." The eminent Saint Thomas Aquinas, a highly honored pillar of the church, wrote that one of the greatest pleasures God granted the blessed souls in heaven was a perfect view of the tortures of the damned, for all eternity. Could it be any more obvious that he had the mindset of a sadist?

Why did this depth of cruelty persist for so many centuries? The answer is plain: it was enormously profitable. The church had devised history's most successful scheme of licit theft: it immediately seized all the property of its victims, and thus became the richest institution in Europe and later in South America. Hitler's Third Reich became wealthy in the same way, by confiscating the property of Jews and other victims; but the Nazis lasted only a couple of decades, while the Inquisition gobbled up five centuries' worth of extortion. It seems that in a culture ruled by a patriarchal religion, cruelty pays off.

FEMINISM AND THE FUTURE

As we seek routes toward a kinder, gentler future, the new feminism seems a hopeful signpost. In ancient societies where women created ethical and moral codes, people seem to have been more peaceable, contented, and cooperative; better supported by the kinship structure, and less troubled by manufactured guilt. Mothers' natural desire to promote the health and happiness of their children seems to have been reflected in the social rules formulated by matrifocal groups, whereas patriarchies like our own engendered many oppressive restrictions aggressively imposed by violence and cruelty.

This is not to be interpreted as a simplistic reverse-sexist view that all men are mean and all women are sweetness and light. Obviously that is not the case. The difference lies in the qualities generally emphasized, admired or rewarded by the culture as a whole.

Any viewer of television, movies, or videogames knows how much attention our culture pays to violent behavior patterns such as war, murder, assault, rape, intimidation, and "heroic" shoot-em-ups in general. Media moguls claim that this fare is what the public wants, though they may be suspected of deliberately building public tastes for their own profit. The fact is that humans -- especially children -- are enough like apes to imitate whatever they see, without passing it through any moral filters. If cruelty is their daily visual input, their behavioral output might copy it. Another fact is that women generally dislike gratuitous violence that masquerades as entertainment, and tend to disagree with "he-man" notions like shooting wild animals is fun, and watching fist fights or violent games is a pleasurable experience.

There are indications now that women are beginning to get in touch with their fundamental nature in ways that have been forbidden them by patriarchal traditions that were set up as the "only possible" moral system several thousand years ago and have kept civilization in thrall to a philosophy that derogates the feminine and the natural world. The all-male deity postulated by Western culture has proved enormously violent in all "his" incarnations, from the warlike Old Testament Yahweh to the familiar Christian deity of crusades, inquisitions, witch hunts, and battlefield invocations the world over. There is a spreading tendency among women to reject this deity (whose churches probably can't survive without women's

devoted input). Studies of the doleful history of Western religious sexism have made it clear that the god created in man's image has promoted more male cruelty toward women than any other single cause.

To replace this deity with proper rehabilitation of the Mother Earth image, not as a transcendent deity but as a precious symbol, may be a significant trend showing the way toward a wiser future, where all human beings might live free from mindless violence, prejudice, and exploitation; where women and children can walk freely on all the streets of any city at any hour; where no one suffers harassment or discrimination on the job; where no child comes into the world unwanted, unloved, or neglected.

Our Mother Earth desperately needs less quantity and more quality of human life. Let us hope that we, as one of her brainier species, will have brains enough to make it so before we allow ourselves to destroy what supports us. The effort will surely need to engage female brains and female authority figures, and the result may be well worth the effort.

SCIENCE: THE FEMINISTS' SCAPEGOAT?

Feminists have become justly critical of the exploitation and waste of natural resources that characterize our technological civilization. They want the earth treated with more respect. They want less of the arrogance of Big Science and Big Business, and more fittingly humble appreciation of the gifts of life. They dislike the sexist dualism that divides lordly male intellectual "mind" from ignoble female emotional "matter." This should be replaced with a more realistic wholeness.

Such criticisms are all very well and laudable from a philosophical viewpoint, but there must be certain caveats. Feminists are in danger of going too far into their own brand of dualism, labeling patriarchal and bad everything that is modern/scientific, and matriarchal and good everything that is primitive/magical. We all accept with off-handed gratitude the many gifts made available every day by technology: electric light, radio, television, telephones, trains, airplanes, cars, computers, central heating, hot water, dishwashers, stoves, grocery stores -- a multitude of consumer goods that we now consider essential, plus the miracles of modern medicine that our vastly increased scientific knowledge has provided.

Thanks to science, we can now know how many light-years distant a certain star is, why springtime sap rises in the trees, what elements form the composition of any natural crystal, what is the function of the pancreas, how animals and plants exchange atmospheric gases, and a million other bits of knowledge that would never have been discovered without the scientific method. Medicine especially has come a long way since primitive healers were treating wounds by beating drums, or trying to cast out the evil spirit causing appendicitis. Only science with its objective, linear approach could have discovered bacteria, viruses, antibiotics, chromosomes, genes, molecules, atoms, hormones, leucocytes, microorganisms, chlorophyll, ozone, not to mention the mind-boggling extent of our galaxy, let alone the existence of other galaxies and the vastness and age of the universe. Almost everything that we can claim to know with any certainty about our world has been learned through science and not by any subjective insight or meditation.

Of course, the subjective has its place. Without it, we are dead at heart, without creativity, without spirit. But we must avoid the trap that lies within the attractive holistic idea: the trap of allowing subjectivity to

substitute for hard knowledge that can be consistently verified. We need hard knowledge. I suspect that too many people reject it for no better reason than that it is difficult to learn. It requires more concentration, mental focus, and reasoning ability than they are able or willing to exert. But gender has nothing to do with this.

It's possible to live a successful life without scientific literacy. Still, those who can't comprehend science are effectively locked out of the seats of power in a technological age. For centuries, women have been locked out on the ground of their alleged irrationality. Men have claimed that women lack logic, objectivity, and reasoning ability; they can't learn scientific procedures and must be restricted to the realms of emotion and service. This has been a major prop for the myth of female intellectual inferiority.

Some feminists fall back into the same old myth by drawing new distinctions between linear and holistic thought, labeling the former masculine and the latter feminine, distinguishing "right-brain" from "left-brain." Although they claim a separate-but-equal status for the "feminine" mode, this is not materially different from some varieties of traditional sexism. For women to imply that women generally cannot, need not, nor should not be scientifically aware is to put down women's very real powers of reasoning, and to cause difficulties for women who pursue scientific careers, and must often contend with this kind of prejudice and see residual negative attitudes from male colleagues. Women trained in scientific methods are perfectly capable of objective reasoning. Many do it brilliantly, deserving more credit than some male associates are prepared to give them.

It is important also for women to analyze and criticize patriarchal myths with the same clear-eyed objectivity, uncovering their untenable premises and secret motives. This should be done in a logical way, without recourse to unfounded hypotheses, baseless claims, or lunatic fringeism. The feminist is not helped by those who lack scientific knowledge and make foolish or false statements about matters of fact. It's easy to prove them wrong, and so cast doubt on their whole theme. Women are not well served by scientific naivete.

It would be a pity to reject any branch of learning for no better reason than that it is too complicated or difficult. It would be a tragedy to plunge the civilized world into a new Dark Age of ignorance for no better cause

than intellectual laziness or determination to "believe" against all rationality. We all have the unfortunate inclination to think our own mental processes somehow right and superior to those of others; but people must be aware of the tendency to put down the scientific attitude just because their own minds don't work that way.

The scientific attitude is the best tool that humanity has developed to find out what nature really is, and what it is not. To reject such a tool would be blinding our newly opened eyes. We have learned more about our world in the past two centuries than in the preceding two millennia. Science is just beginning to show us the astonishing diversity, complexity, and richness of our planet, or which our species is a tiny component. Should people be allowed to deny that mighty vision simply because they find scientific truth too demanding for their taste, or too destructive of their myths?

True, scientific investigations of nature arose within a system dominated by men, and with underlying patriarchal attitudes. But it must be remembered that the whole point of scientific method is to exclude the personal attitudes of the investigator, no matter what they are, and to concentrate on the subject matter alone. In fact, patriarchal religion has been often bitterly opposed to the progress of science, whose objective investigations have continually revealed the untenability of bible-based concepts about the world.

Ever since the Catholic Church forced Galileo to renounce his proofs of the earth's orbit around the sun, theological authorities have been resisting all manner of knowledge that clearly disproves their views. Were it not for scientific studies of both nature and human culture, we might still be struggling in the grip of a rigidly sexist theocracy, compelled to accept absurd fables as God-given truth

Throughout the ages, humans have been asking themselves millions of questions that had no answers. How high is the sky, and why does it look blue? What is air, and why do we need to breathe it? Why does the sun give off heat? What makes seasons change? What makes a seed sprout? What makes a heart beat? Why does wood burn, while stone does not? What causes lightning, thunder, earthquakes, wind, ocean tides? How is it that water falls from the sky, and smoke rises up to it? Why is blood red? How can a woman's body grow a baby? Etc.

It's easy enough to produce imaginative answers to such questions. But the truly inquisitive mind is not satisfied with imaginative or metaphorical answers. The truly inquisitive mind wants to *know*. Imagination is fine for art, music, drama, dance, poetry, fiction. But how intelligent would we be, if we persisted in our forbears' beliefs that the earth is flat, that the sunset reflects the fires of the underworld, or that a disease can be frightened out of the body by a scary mask?

Literal information does not depend on fantasy. The valid premise of science is that, once information has been established and verified by experimentation, that information can be trusted, and any fables that contradict it, no matter how venerable, must be simply abandoned. Women should continue to secure access to the best scientific knowledge of their time, for themselves and their children. People don't have to be scientists themselves, in order to be scientifically literate. They have only to read and interest themselves in literature that truthfully describes the world.

What many feminists rightly mistrust is not scientific information *per se*, but the moral and ethical turpitude of people who misapply such information in destructive ways. It is reasonable to fear the misuse of technology that can lead to a poisoned Earth, damaged soil, air, and water. We should denounce the destruction of whole populations of plants and animals through carelessness. We can be horrified by the growing burden of man-made toxic substances, and we can fear for the lives of our descendants in an increasingly inhospitable environment.

Worst of all, we can be terrified by the vision of a nuclear doomsday that could leave our once-fertile Earth as sterile as Mars, a doomsday brought about by the foolish international hostilities of man-dominated governments with their hugely overgrown war machines. But we shouldn't spread a blanket of blame over everything scientific because of these justifiable fears. It isn't science that is the enemy; it's the misapplication of scientific knowledge by the bottom-line kind of morality that permits anything as long as it can make money.

We should not make a scapegoat out of the best means of comprehending nature that humanity has been able to devise after thousands of years of trying. To do so would be a diversion from the real issue, which is the need to develop a new morality that will make better use of both nature's gifts and human understanding of them. Indiscriminate

trashing of scientific disciplines, because of religious or sociological beliefs, will take us nowhere but backward. We do not need a renunciation of learning. We need to make better use of what has been learned.

CALENDARS

Once upon a time, calendars were based not on the sun but on the moon, which goes through thirteen complete phases per annum. This provided a very tidy calendar of thirteen 28-day months, each month having four weeks of seven days apiece. This made a total of 364 days in the year, so one day was added at the end. That is why so many folk tales talk of "a year and a day" as an important period, and why the number thirteen was once considered sacred by pagan communities, which is why the later church condemned it as evil or unlucky. The more generous "baker's dozen" of thirteen loaves harks back to the earlier idea; bakers were assumed to follow the peasants' rather than the church's system.

Because women's menstrual periods were viewed as corresponding with phases of the moon, the lunar calendar was associated with matriarchal Goddess figures. The original Mother Goddess preceded the Father Gods, who were not recognized as important until the discovery of fatherhood, which came fairly late in human cultures. Since it was obvious that children emerged from women's bodies and not from those of men, and sexual relations were usually random, primitive peoples believed that mothers created their babies from their own blood, and bones from their own ribs. Thus "blood" relationships originally meant families founded by the matriarchs. The mothers of many of the early savior gods, such as Mithra, were always virgin mothers because they needed no mates. Mandatory marriage came only after it was discovered that men could be fathers if the mothers could be kept monogamous.

Among many primitives, the important male adults for each child were not fathers but the mother's brothers, who shared the essential blood bond and therefore cared for a sister's children. In French, the maternal uncle is still designated "own uncle," while those on the father's side are just plain uncles. Even in the 18th and 19th centuries C.E., primitive groups were found in the South Pacific and elsewhere who believed that women became pregnant not because of sexual activity but as a result of eating certain foods or doing magic rituals.

Solar calendars began when the discovery of fatherhood associated this function with the sun gods. Although there were primary sun goddesses in some places, like Japan, the sun and moon were usually

designated yang and yin, male and female. The early Catholic Church therefore mistrusted all lunar associations since it detested any hint of female divinity, and thus forbade lunar calendars altogether insisting on breaking up the thirteenth month and scattering its days. The old Mother Goose rhyme still records the battle between pagan and Christian views: "How many months be in the year? There be thirteen, I say," followed by "How many months be in the year? There be but twelve, I say." The two incompatible systems seem to have coexisted for a few centuries.

The peasants, or *pagani* ("country folk") retained their attachment to the Goddess Luna and her counterparts in various charms for planting and insuring the food supply, protecting their homes, and proceedings "in the name of..." sundry ancestral deities. The days of the week in English still honor heathen divinities: after Sun-Day and Moon-Day come Tiw's Day, Woden's Day, Thor's Day, Freya's Day, and Saturn's Day. The months still bear pagan names: Janua, Februata, Martius, Maia, Juno. The Romans added two months, July and August, honoring Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar. This threw their count off, as shown by the last four: September, October, November and December are Latin words for seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth, even though they are now counted as ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth.

January

January originally honored the Goddess Janua, otherwise known as Uni, or *yoni*, the physical "gate" to natural events like birth and death. Titled Antevorta and Postvorta, she looked both forward and backward to both future and past. She was later masculinized as Janus, the two-faced god of gateways, and still later canonized as the totally mythical Saint Januarius, allegedly also a guardian of gateways, when the Roman Church seized his shrine at Naples and converted it into a church.

February

In ancient Rome, February was sacred to Juno Februata, the Goddess in her annual *febris* (fever) of sexual passion. Its festival was the Lupercalia, a day for magical encouragement of fertility in the coming season. Young men would draw "billets" (cards) inviting women to be partners in dating games and sexual activities that were believed to help the crops. The Church condemned all this, and rededicated the day to a dubious Saint Valentine, who had several different, mutually contradictory

biographies. One of the more popular sources seems to have been the second-century Gnostic Christian leader Valentinus, whose sect regarded sex as a sacrament rather than a sin.

They retained the Goddess in the form of Sophia, "Holy Wisdom," and ritually celebrated her union with the Redeemer. They practiced "a rite of spiritual marriage with angels in a nuptial chamber," and their spoken formula was: "Let the seed of light descend into thy bridal chamber, receive the bridegroom; open thine arms to embrace him." After this ritual the participant was supposedly endowed with the secret knowledge of love both spiritual and physical. It is hardly surprising that "Saint Valentine" remained the official patron of lovers.

March

March was dedicated to the war god Mars, because it was the season in which Romans prepared for their military campaigns. They chose to do battle in the more comfortable months of spring and summer, rather than marching through ice and snow. Mars was not originally a war god, but the divine father of King Latinus, legendary ancestor of all Latin tribes. Sacrifices were offered to him on the Campus Martius, "Field of Mars." He became associated with war because Roman legions carried his emblem and prayed to him for victory.

Christianized nations now know the major March figure as Saint Patrick, said to have lived in the ninth century and given the title of Patricius, meaning a father-figure or a priest. Some claimed that his real name was Maewyn Succat, and he was a British-born hero whose allegedly autobiographical *Confessions* were called the writings of Saint Patrick, even though they were unknown until four hundred years after Patrick was supposed to have lived. It was a period in which monks were busily Christianizing ancient heroes and pagan shrines.

Patrick was also identified with "the Irish knight Sir Patrice" of the *Morte d'Arthur*, and with the Irish god of the shamrock, Trefuilngid Tre-eochair, "bearing the Triple Key," a trident representing a triple phallus. He was originally a consort of the ancient Triple Goddess, so *The Book of Leinster* claimed that Patrick's mother was the Goddess Macha, who belonged to the old pagan female trinity symbolized by the shamrock. No matter how convoluted the reasoning, Patrick had to be somehow identified with this all-important totem.

Yet another tradition said Patrick was really Palladius, called "the first bishop to the Irish who believe in Christ." Palladius was a Latin title of paternity, associated with the Palladium, a sacred phallic pillar worshiped in Rome during the Ides of March. However, it is fairly certain that there were no Christian bishops in Ireland until much later in the Christian era. Saint Bernard complained in the twelfth century that the Irish were still given to "barbarous rites," because Christianity had not taken root among them.

April

The April Fool was a ubiquitous figure in folk traditions dating from his early appearance at the head of Roman springtime ceremonial processions, where he represented those who worshiped the Moon Goddess Mania. They performed "antics", meaning ancient dances like the notorious "antic hey." They were sometimes called Moonstruck or Lunatics. The April Fool was called such things as Foolish Man, Folly, the Jester, the Joker; but he was supposed to be actually wise, hiding under ridiculous behaviors the worship of primitive ancestors called the Manes.

In the medieval period, every ruler had to have a Fool or Joker, whose costume of "dunce" cap, jingling bells, and checked fabrics indicated an actually important position at court. He was supposed to be a master of jokes and trickeries, making fun of haughty courtiers and mocking their pretenses. He was so closely associated with kingship that he became the Fool in decks of Tarot cards, morphing into the Joker of regular playing-card decks derived from the Tarot.

May

May was named for the Goddess Maia, virgin mother of Hermes, who was almost certainly a derivative of the very ancient Maya, virgin mother of Buddha, and other names like Mara, Mary, Maria, Mana, and Mai. taken from the Sanskrit basic mother-syllable MA, supposedly uttered by the primal Goddess as she gave birth to the universe. In Europe, Maya became the Maiden Goddess of spring, worshiped by the Wearing of the Green in honor of the earth mother's new garment, and by ritual fornicating in plowed fields to promote the growth of crops. May was called a "honeymoon" of sexual license throughout medieval Europe up to the sixteenth century. The important festival was May Day, featuring a "divine marriage" between the May King and the Queen of the May, who was also described

as "the Roman Goddess Flora." The chosen couple impersonated Frey and Freya, or the Lord and Lady, or some other comparable divine pair.

May Eve was the springtime equivalent of Halloween, or All Hallows Eve. In the British Isles it was Beltane, in Germany Walpurgisnacht. The Church regarded it as a festival of witchcraft. Decorated processions and dances around the Maypole (a giant phallus) were meant to celebrate fertility and overt sexuality, always a red light for churchmen. Despite all ecclesiastical opposition, however, the May Eve festivals, "May ridings" and Maypole dances continued unaltered for many centuries.

June

The month of the summer solstice, or Midsummer, was dedicated to Rome's imperial Goddess Juno, who was actually much older than Rome and probably descended from the Etruscan Uni, one of many prehistoric female universe-creators. Juno's numerous appellations demonstrated an enormous versatility and were sometimes viewed as separate goddess figures; she was Queen of Heaven, Mother of the People, Goddess of Fate; Juno Martialis, virgin mother of Mars; Juno Februa, Goddess of erotic love; Juno Lucina, Goddess of Celestial Light; Juno the Preserver, like the prehistoric Hindu Goddess Durga. The titles were endless. Her "marriage" to the male creator Jupiter was a very late revision.

In Rome it was said that every woman had a *juno* or inner spirit, corresponding to the *genius* in a man. Note that the word "genius" was preserved throughout the patriarchal period, while the "juno" is no longer understood. Nor is it understood that one of Juno's symbols, the cowrie shell, in India still sacred to the yonic Goddess Kauri after whom it was named, was seen as a very graphic imitation of female genitalia, once openly adored as the Gate of Life.

Two equinoxes and a solstice:
Easter, Halloween, Christmas

Easter

Back in the days when our modern electricity-generated city skyglow was unknown and Earth's air was clearer, all the stars were visible, all night. People paid a lot of attention to the skies because they thought celestial events bore intimate relations to various aspects of human life.

Solar cycles were of particular importance because they announced the timing of the seasons, and thus dictated human preparations and behaviors.

The date of Easter varies because it is still a lunar holiday, just as in antiquity when pagan astronomers calculated it. It is still celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. Easter's dating system has nothing to do with Christianity but is a direct descent of thousands of years of pagans' reckoning.

As the spring equinoctial sowing festival, it was an important time for hopeful fertility rituals. In ancient times people were always preoccupied with the subject of fertility. One summer of insufficient crop yields could mean a winter of starvation. Spring rituals of sympathetic magic mimed the proper burial and resurrection of essential plants, often represented by the Green Man: a face surrounded by leaves, still seen carved in a number of old churches. He also became the Green Knight of Arthurian romance, or the "Green George" later canonized as the mythical Saint George still worshiped on Easter Monday.

In England, the name of Easter came from the Saxon Goddess of Fertility, Eostre (or Ostara), possibly evolved from earlier middle-eastern names like Astarte, Ishtar, and her Hebrew equivalent Esther. One of Eostre's symbols was the egg, honored as the source of bird life just as the womb of animal life and the seed of plant life.

Rabbits were also connected with the festival because they reproduce in spring, and were everywhere assumed to be the most fertile of animals. In China, markings on the moon were supposed to show an image of the Moon-Hare, indicating that planting should take place when the moon is full. An early sacrificial rite involved the eating of rabbit meat, to ingest its reproductive magic, and afterward carrying the rabbit's foot as a good-luck charm. Now, of course, the rabbit is not sacrificed but transformed into the Easter Bunny, bringing candy eggs to the children, many of whom come to believe that rabbits reproduce by laying eggs. Elaborate, expensive jeweled Easter eggs were made famous by Faberge, who manufactured them for the Russian Czars.

Halloween

All Hallows was the annual harvest festival for ancient European pagans, who evoked the ghosts of their dead ancestors to the feasts to honor them. It was widely believed that ghosts had occult powers and might play dirty tricks if they were offended, so at the festival they were all hallowed, praised and offered treats to share in the feast. Placating the supernatural, for fear of retribution, is an obvious and intrinsic part of all religious practice. It can persist even long after the original rationale is forgotten. At the festivals there would be actors masked and dressed up to impersonate the ghosts and accept honors on their behalf. Children still carry on the trick-or-treat ritual even though seems no longer necessary but merely cute.

The church took over All Hallows and claimed that all the honored dead were Christian saints instead of pagan ancestors. But Halloween still bears its original meaning in the Mexican *Dia de los Muertos*. "Day of the Dead", when there would be picnicking in the graveyards as a way of communing with deceased ancestors.

The prominence of both Halloween ("Hallows Eve") and Christmas Eve recall the ancient practice of celebrating the "Eve" as the heart of the festival, because the old moon calendar figured days from noon to noon instead of midnight to midnight.

Christmas

It has become customary to think of the Magi as the first Christmas gift-givers. But few people have read their background story.

The word Magi did not mean "kings of Orient" as the carol claims. It was the term for magician-priests of the Persian/Zoroastrian solar deity Mithra, who became the later Roman empire's most popular messiah (a Persian word for the annunciator of the apocalypse). Long before the Christian era, Mithraism spoke of salvation achieved by their savior, and of the ultimate armageddon when the world would be divided between good and evil, light and darkness. Mithra performed the usual miracles: he healed the sick, made the blind see and the lame walk. He was called Light of the World, and his holy day was the *Dies Solis*: Sun-day. He had twelve disciples, representing the twelve signs of the zodiac. In Rome, Vatican Hill was occupied by a Mithraic temple where the high priest was known as the *pater patrum*, "Father of Fathers", later shortened to "pa-pa"

and then to "pope." The temple was seized by Christians in the late 4th century C.E.

Ancient people worried that some year the sun might not recover its light after the winter solstice but continue to wane, so there were always elaborate birth ceremonies at that time to confirm faith in the new birth of the solar deity. A number of named savior gods of the ancient world had myths of a solstitial nativity, usually god-begotten and virgin-born. To the infant Mithra, whose birth was also witnessed by shepherds, three Magi brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh, officially symbolizing his light, wisdom, and annual ascent to heavenly heights at the spring equinox.

Christians copied these popular traditions and claimed that the Magi traveled from all the way from their native Persia to honor the Christians' latter-day savior's birth. But how did the Magi get to Bethlehem, which lies far to the west of Persia, by following a star in the east?

A recent feminist joke on the basically silly subject of the Magi supposed that if, instead of three "wise men" there had been three "wise women", they would have (1) asked directions; (2) arrived on time; (3) brought practical gifts; (4) helped deliver the baby; (5) cleaned the stable; (6) made a casserole; and (7) provided nursing instructions. And there would have been genuine peace on earth.

Imitating the "wise men" by giving gifts to children became an integral part of the celebration, rationalized as showing supernatural beings the necessity of providing food for the next generation. Also important were the typically pagan decorations, evergreens like pine boughs, holly, and ivy, because they did not "die" but remained green throughout the year.

Holly was named for the Nordic Goddess Holle, or Hel, queen of the underworld and keeper of the dead. Her "hell" was not viewed as a place of punishment but simply the destination of all souls. Like other evergreens, holly stood for the hope of ongoing life, and the holly's red berries signified her sacred blood. Wreaths of ivy were prominent in the Dionysian cult, signifying fertility and inspiration. Holly stood for the Goddess, ivy for the God. This female/male connotation continued into Christmas games up to the 17th century in England, when the holiday fun included a mock battle between master and mistress of the house: "Great is the contention of holly and ivy, whether master or dame wears the breeches."

Christian authorities objected to all pagan decorations. The Council of Bracara ruled that "no Christian should bring holly into the house, because it was a custom of heathen people." People continued to use such decorations anyway, and eventually the bishops had to cave in and allow them even in church. The decorated pine tree was popular in Germany for many years, but was accepted in England only after Queen Victoria's German-born consort made it a Christmas custom.

THE WINTER SOLSTICE

From the earliest times, humans have exerted their minds to relate all observable natural phenomena to themselves. Cyclic movements of the heavenly bodies have been considered particularly significant in human terms, and still are, as every astrologer knows. By the late Stone Age people were keeping celestial calendars, as shown by artifacts such as the so-called Venus of Laussel and the great solar-oriented temples like Avebury and Stonehenge.

The winter solstice was always viewed as a dangerous time, because the sun was at its nadir position. People feared that some year it might continue to decline until all the world would go dark and die. They devised rituals of rebirth and renewal, believing that these afforded not just the symbolism but the active magic that would cause the new sun to be born as an infant savior rising in the heavens. By the time of classical antiquity, elaborate religions had grown around this concept.

At the end of each winter solstice period, when the light began to grow, all the ancient world celebrated the birth of the solar god from his virgin mother: the god who was called Light of the World, Sun of Righteousness, Savior, Son of God, Good Shepherd, He who rises with healing in his wings, and many similar epithets. Some of his other names were Krishna, Osiris, Orpheus, Heracles, Dionysus, Mithra, Attis, and Adonis (Hebrew Adonai, "the Lord"). The sun who was newborn in the darkest hours of winter was assimilated to all these gods and more. His usual title was Christos or Christ, Greek for "Anointed One."

In Hellenized Alexandria a newborn baby was displayed and the people gave the ritual cry: "The Virgin has brought forth! The light is growing!" Egypt had long revered the annual birth of the savior Osiris, whose coming was announced by angels, shepherds, and the Three Wise Men, meaning the three stars in the belt of Orion, which point directly to the brightest star in the heavens, Sirius. Its rising signaled the all-important annual flooding of the Nile, bringing salvation from famine. The savior's body and blood were symbolically eaten as bread and wine, and those who thus assimilated him were said to spend eternity with their Good Shepherd who led them to his Nefer-Nefer land of green pastures and still waters, as specifically stated in Egyptian hymns. He was sometimes called

Son of the Sun, or Osiris-Ra, or Sarapis, who became virtually identical with the Judeo-Christian Yahweh around the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E.

Zoroastrian Persia contributed the Messiah (Hebrew Mashiach) to the growing mythos. His Persian name was Mithra, who became enormously popular in Rome, where his temple stood on Vatican Hill until the 6th century C.E. The title of the Mithraic high priest, Pater Patrum, morphed into "pa-pa" or "pope."

Mithra was born of the usual virgin on December 25th, the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun," which Christians adopted in the 4th century C.E. and renamed Christmas. Some said Mithra was the child of an incestuous union between the sun god and his own mother, just as Jesus, who was God, was similarly born of the Mother of God. Mithra's birth was witnessed by angels, shepherds and the Three Wise Men, known in Persia as Magi, "magicians" or "seers." Mithra performed miracles of healing, cast out devils, made the blind see and the lame walk, and collected twelve disciples who represented the zodiacal signs surrounding the sun. His followers held their weekly services on Sun-day, and practiced seven sacraments including a communion with wine and bread marked with a cross. Mithra's death and resurrection took place at the vernal equinox, which was named in Celtic lands after the springtime Goddess Eostre, (Easter), or Astarte. Mithra's worshipers looked forward to a great battle at the world's end between spirits of light and spirits of darkness, after which the Messiah would return to earth to render the Last Judgment.

The solstitial myths were not assimilated into the story of Jesus, as given in the synoptic gospels, until the end of the second century C.E. Even the Gospel of Luke barely made it into the canon, winning by only one vote at the Council of Nicea. Since only the canonical gospels have birth stories copied from the general tradition, without that one vote modern Christmases would have no creche, no star in the east, no virgin mother, no angels or shepherds or Magi, no flight into Egypt nor any Slaughter of the Innocents which derived from the myths of Krishna and Buddha, among others.

In fact, every detail of the Christian mythos was copied from the common fund of solar god-tales known throughout Eurasia for many centuries B.C.E.: the god-begotten solstitial birth from a virgin of royal descent, the Wise Men's gifts, the baptism, temptation in the wilderness,

miracles of healing, multiplying loaves and fishes, turning water into wine, raising the dead, walking on water, preachings and parables, all plagiarized; the anointing into Christ-hood (Christ-ening) by a priestess (Mary of Magdala), the Last Supper with disciples, the equinoctial crucifixion between two others, with scourging, wounding in the side, burial in a new tomb, descent into the underworld, resurrection, and the promise of a glorious return, a Last Judgment, and eternal bliss for believers: all came from the stories of pagan gods and heroes. Scholars have found not one original phrase anywhere in the Gospels that can't be traced back to an older pre-Christian root.

So, even though there is nothing original in the Christian version of the solar savior, the solstitial festival is still with us, apparently to remain as long as there are still human beings on earth dependent on the life-giving warmth of the sun and able to observe the cycles of the heavens. And as many scholars have noted, it may be that the real power of Christianity lies in the archetypal beauty of the sun and the promise of new life with a new season's growing warmth, just as our remote ancestors celebrated the prospect of a renewal of sustenance, after the lean winter was over, in their primitive villages a hundred thousand years ago.

'TIS THE SEASON

December, whose name means "month number ten," holds a date that ancient people often regarded as the most significant, perilous time of the year: the winter solstice. Two thousand years ago it occurred around December 25, but the phenomenon of precession has now placed it closer to December 21. The problem was that the sunlight seemed to weaken and retreat farther into night as the solstice loomed, and the ancients feared that a time might come when it would keep going and fail to return: an unthinkable disaster that would destroy all life on earth. Early in human history, rituals were devised to make sure of the sun's solstitial rebirth and renewal.

Rituals are invented according to the principle of sympathetic magic: that is, to make something happen, you symbolically imitate it. If rain is needed, you pour water. If you want to hurt an enemy, you mutilate his image. For success in hunting, you do dances imitating the kill. If you want the divine sun to be reborn, you light lamps and stage birth rituals. When Christians adopted the solstitial birth-day, they gave it the same hopeful title that Persian worshipers of Mithra had used centuries before, Birthday of the Unconquered Sun.

Throughout the Roman empire, the worship of Mithra was more widely popular than Christianity for the first four centuries of the so-called Christian era. In 307 C.E. the emperor officially declared Mithra "Protector of the Empire." His birth was witnessed by shepherds and by the "wise men" or priests known as Magi: magicians. Mithra performed the usual assortment of miracles, healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out devils, making the blind see and the lame walk. He celebrated a Last Supper with his twelve disciples (the twelve signs of the zodiac), died and rose again at the spring equinox, and originated a sacramental meal known as *mizd*, (Latin *missa*, English *mass*) in which his worshipers ate bread marked with a cross. They looked forward to salvation in the Last Days, when the apocalyptic battle will result in conquest of the devil of darkness, Ahriman, by the solar god of light, the Sun of Righteousness, Ahura Mazda. The temple of Mithra on Vatican Hill was seized by Christians in 376 C.E., but the bishops of Rome adopted even the Mithraic high priest's title of Pater Patrum, later Papa, or "pope." Recently discovered vases from a Roman Mithraeum, dated in the third century A.D., bore the words "You saved us by having shed the eternal blood."

In fact, virtually all the details of the Christian solstitial legend came from much older pagan sources. For another example, in Egypt three or four thousand years ago, people knew that the all-important annual flooding of the Nile, on which their crops depended, coincided with the rising of the star Sirius, the brightest star in the heavens. They said this star represented the soul of the savior Osiris, god of both earthly crops and the after-life paradise. Like the reaped and replanted grain, Osiris died every year and was reborn as Sirius rose. His worshipers chanted, "The Virgin has brought forth! The Savior is born!" They believed that by eating the flesh and blood of Osiris, in the form of consecrated bread and wine, they would take his essence into their own bodies and thus become immortal like him. Egyptians described Osiris as the savior "to whom men and women turned for assurance of immortality."

During Osiris's death phase, his star-spirit Sirius was in the keeping of the jackal god of death, Anubis, the "Great Dog", whose constellation was and still is called Canis Major, the Great Dog, of which Sirius is the alpha star. The crucial rising of Sirius was heralded by the row of three stars in the belt of Orion, called the Three Wise Men, the same as the Persian Magi. A line drawn through these three stars points directly at Sirius, so they became the annunciators who could say "We have seen his star in the east," meaning that it rose, like all heavenly bodies, in the east. Later Christians forgot the star lore and insisted on human Magi coming from Persia, but had trouble explaining how the Magi could travel so far westward to Bethlehem by following a star in the east.

In the Near East it was said that Bethlehem was where the god Adonis was born of the virgin Myrrha. Her sacred plant, myrrh, was used as an aphrodisiac in the rites of Adonis in his later role as consort of Aphrodite, and thorny twigs of myrrh made up his crown of thorns. Some early Christians referred to Jesus's mother as Myrrh of the Sea; other versions of her name were Marina, Mara, Maya, or Mari-anna, possibly all derived from Maia, the Virgin Mother of Buddha, five centuries earlier, said to have been derived from the sound of a baby's cry. All over the world, the syllable Ma is ubiquitous in the names of Mother Goddess figures. Shepherds attended the birth of Adonis, who was the god of both crops and flocks. He too was known as the Good Shepherd.

Another contributor to Christian symbolism was the Phrygian god Attis, whose cult became very popular in Rome. Born of the usual virgin

mother to bring back the light and the growing season, Attis was called "Most Holy God, Who Holds the Universe Together," and greeted with the phrase, "Hail, Bridegroom, Hail, New Light." He was crucified on a pine tree, which was said to be green all year round due to the infusion of his holy blood. Celebrants carried pine boughs in his rites. Europeans continued to adore the winter greenery of the pine all the way up to Victorian times, when the Christmas tree was officially adopted in England thanks to Victoria's German consort, Prince Albert.

In northern Europe an evergreen widely revered as a symbol of ongoing life was the holly, sacred to the underworld Goddess Helle, or Hohle, or Hel. Her name gave us the English the word hell, though her underworld was not a place of torture but simply a place of the dead, prior to any rebirth. The red berries of the holly represented drops of the Goddess's life-giving blood, an idea dating all the way back to the primitive perception of female blood as the source of all life. Holly and other evergreens were common in wreaths and other solstitial decorations. The Christmas hymn "The Holly and the Ivy" commemorates a very old tradition, as does the Yule log, lighted like other sacred fires to assist the rebirth of sunlight. In the nineteenth century, however, some Christian ministers denounced the Yule "disorders... derived from these Roman Saturnalian and Bacchanalian festivals, which should cause all pious Christians eternally to abominate them." The pious Christians, apparently, didn't abominate them at all. Customs arising from the worship of many virgin-born pagan saviors around the beginning of the Common Era continued to be practiced even after their original intent was long forgotten.

America's most popular symbol of the season, Santa Claus, also had a somewhat questionable background. He was described as a fourth-century bishop of Myra in Asia Minor. An official Christian version of his legend said that he gave three bags of gold to three women to "save" them from prostitution; but Christian Gnostics, some of whom still practiced sexual rites, may have been continuing the use of sacred priestess-prostitutes who perpetuated the traditional worship of Aphrodite and Adonis, in the city dedicated to Adonis's mother Myrrha.

Later, Nicholas became identified with the Italian city of Bari, where some bones said to be his were installed to serve as a focus of pilgrimage in the eleventh century. Many adherents of St. Nicholas had taken over the old temples of the sea god Poseidon, popularly known as "the Sailor," a title inherited by Nicholas who became patron saint of sailors. His Bari

temple was also dedicated to a female consort known as Befana, "the Grandmother," who annually filled children's stockings with presents and who was worshiped with gift-giving ceremonies. It was a common habit to give children gifts and treats on holy days, so they would always remember the importance of such occasions.

St. Nicholas "the Sailor" was revered by the maritime Dutch, who called him Sinter Klaas, later Latinized as Santa Claus. Dutch immigrants brought him to America, where he was transformed into today's jolly red-coated symbol of the winter solstice, fat with feasting and overflowing with gifts, especially gifts for children. All religious ceremonies that were perceived as important evolved into "Feast" days, so that even if people went hungry at other times they were obligated to provide as much food as possible on these occasions. On some level, always in the past million years or so, the life-essential function of eating had to be demonstrated to the deities on their special days, so that food would continue to be provided. Sympathetic magic is still with us, and at the time of the winter solstice we still delight in it.

Today we are fairly sure that the sunlight will return in a few months' time to its former strength, and that eating a god's symbolic flesh will not necessarily make us immortal, and that Santa Claus is not real even though we teach our children to think so while they are young. But the magical fantasies of the solstice continue, and probably will continue to be celebrated for centuries to come. Merry Christmas.

ON IMMORTALITY

The concept of immortality is one of the most grandiose expressions of human egotism: the pretense that we are so radically different from every other form of life on earth that we will not cease to exist as individuals. Despite the undeniable proof we see all around us, that every living thing sooner or later comes to its end, we invent mental images of our own perpetuity. We greatly fear the intrusion of reality upon this imagery, so we create religious brainwashing that begins in childhood and usually remains unquestioned throughout life.

We also fear to witness what really happens to the dead. In most cultures, corpses are either completely destroyed, or securely enclosed and hidden away. Some have invented mummification, and its highly profitable modern descendant, embalming, to pretend for a while that the body won't decay after all. But it will, in spite of all such complex procedures, and we don't want to watch. According to the Catholic church, there are numbers of alleged saints whose bodies remained fresh for centuries, but such nonsense is not much heeded nowadays.

Nevertheless, we have to realize that the dead rot away inevitably, so we create non-earthly places for them to exist in: heavens in the sky, hells underground. We surely know that the sky really has nothing but air, and beyond it lie billions of light-years of dark, empty space. We also know what lies beneath the earth's surface, and it's not a realm of tormenting demons or hellfires decreed by the cruelty of a punishing God. How could we endure eternal torture when we are without any nerves to feel? We know that the pearly gates and legions of harp-strumming angels, which have been literally believed for centuries, are simply not possible. Yet we can envision them as clearly as we see Santa Claus. People speak of the dead "looking down" on them, as if the dead somehow exist in the empty sky. On the other hand, sometimes they "walk the earth", and are seen as benevolent or malevolent spirits still among us, seen or unseen.

Deep down, we know perfectly well that the only real persistence of our individual image is in the memories of other humans, usually family for a generation or two, or because of our works. Much flowery language develops around our overwhelming desire to be "remembered." We are enjoined to "remember" deceased heroes of all sorts, so they can still exist at least in the imaginations of the living. Today's fancy, expensive funerals

developed from the centuries-old, primitive belief that ghosts are out there somewhere watching and listening, and they want praise and kowtowing, or they might take offense. Ghosts were feared, even those of formerly beloved relatives.

A tastier synonym for "ghost" is "soul", a typically religious concept that exists only as a word. It is roughly envisioned as our basic consciousness, actually a product of the gray matter within our skulls, which is just as perishable as the rest of the body. Patriarchal societies insisted that soul is the really important part of a person, and it is simply a "seed" implanted in a woman by a man. Official church doctrine always declared that a baby's soul comes only from the father's semen. This led to male claims on family names, property, and innumerable rights not allowed to women. Of course, it was not until 1928 that the human ovum was discovered and seen to be much larger and more complex than a spermatozoon. Religious notions of the male "seed" bearing the soul are obvious nonsense, but they persist nevertheless among the ignorant who still worship Allah or Yahweh.

Centuries before the advent of patriarchy, worldwide beliefs usually attributed the soul to the mother. The primitive but logical assumption was that babies were formed from the mother's blood, which remained in the womb for that purpose instead of emerging with each menstrual phase of the moon. Thus, family relationships were always "blood" relationships; we still use the same term. According to the early Egyptians, a mother gave her "heart's blood" to create her child's soul. Mothers were given more respect than fathers, but all male "blood" relatives such as brothers, maternal uncles, nephews and cousins in the maternal line were all part of the lineage.

When Darwin demonstrated that humans are simply life forms like all other animals, having outsized brains to make up for their usually inferior senses and physical strength, religious fundamentalists were horrified by the possible diminution of father souls and father gods, and frantically denied the facts of evolution. Some still do, even though against incontrovertible truths. They claim that only humans possess souls, and all other creatures are soulless. Those who are keenly aware of the genuine love and intelligence demonstrated by their pets tend to contradict this view. Some people bury their deceased pets with as much ceremonial grieving as they lavish on relatives.

So what can we conclude about our fabled immortality? First, that it is a monumentally successful money-making scam; second, that it is perpetuated by our monumentally egotistical view of ourselves; third, that it can exist only in our imagination, but nowhere in the real world. The fact that it still exists, and continues to be perpetuated by a majority of human beings, attests to the determination of believers, no matter how contrary the evidence. We need to be grownup enough to control our egotism, accept the brevity of each individual human life, and use our time as wisely as possible.

SUICIDE

Over the course of 550 years, the Inquisition was active in every country of Europe except Scandinavian lands. During that time -- twice the whole history of the United States -- the Inquisition was also a major fund-raising arm of the Catholic Church in South and Central America, and even in the Spanish settlements of California, thanks to its rule that the Church could immediately seize all the property of anyone who was accused of heresy. No need to wait for conviction; in any case, conviction was almost inevitable, considering the routine use of horrific engines of torture. Consequently, millions of people were tortured and burned, whose only real crime was owning property coveted by the Church.

Nowadays, Vatican authorities are trying to claim that the victims of the Inquisition amounted to only a few hundred thousand. However, Henry Charles Lea, who wrote the definitive History of the Inquisition from original documents in the Vatican library, noted that in his time -- the early 1900s -- priests were already beginning to destroy the mass of incriminating documents. Conservative secular estimates amount to more than 9 million people killed by the Church's foremost money-making scheme. The figure is not unreasonable and may even be on the low side, in view of the length of time taken by this particularly vicious extortion racket.

Early in the Inquisition's history, it was noted that people fearing to be accused would often commit suicide rather than face the torture chamber, thus depriving the Church of their property. So the Church declared that suicide was a mortal sin and the victim would be subjected in hell to eternal torture without any possibility of parole or pardon. It worked, because people had enough imagination to think hell's torments would be even worse than those of the inquisitors. Eventually it was ruled legal for the church to seize the property of self-killers or of those who pitied the dying enough to help them along; but this took a while to institute.

In time laws against suicide were enacted in most western countries, and became part of the general culture, because Protestant churches also came to see that keeping the terminally ill alive as long as possible could be a significant source of funds -- as did, of course, the medical profession. Thus ending one's own life came to be generally viewed as a crime, even though the criminals could never be satisfactorily punished. Instead, the heirs were punished by the loss of their inheritance, a circumstance that

could only lead to desperate choices between pity and greed on the part of those whose terminally ill relatives begged them for their final relief.

Suicide is still viewed as a crime by most religious traditions, and by Catholicism in particular. Those who assist in suicide are considered criminals also. Agonizing terminal illness is not viewed as an excuse. For having brought millions of dollars of donations into the Church, Mother Teresa has become one of the few actual human beings to be added to the Catholic pantheon of saints. Yet she was said to cruelly deny her dying patients any kind of pain-killers, not only because they might hasten death but even because, she told them, God lovingly imposed the pain to help absolve the victim of his or her sins.

To to kill yourself to avoid pain has been generally derogated in Western culture, based primarily on this Catholic history of ecclesiastical greed. It is still one of the most unkind beliefs ever perpetrated, a rule of outstanding brutality that allows convicted murderers to be killed painlessly, but insists on unbearable moribund sufferings for law-abiding citizens. We take pity on our pet animals in their final hours, and release them from their pain by a simple, comfortable shot of barbiturate or sodium pentathol. Why can we -- or our doctors -- not do the same for our suffering relatives or friends? If we were truly civilized, the barbaric rules derived from the avarice of a barbaric religious tradition would have become obsolete long before now.

BARBARA WALKER'S RANT

Theologian Mary Daly once wrote, "Anger is essential for clearing away inauthentic structures." The following diatribe is an expression of such anger, built up through years of doubt, investigation, and revelation.

A religion based on Old Testament legend presents a god so brutal as to demand utter destruction of countless cities, with slaughter of every man, woman, child, and animal (except for virgin girls, who are to be raped); a god who condones slavery; a god who orders parents -- such as Abraham and Jephthah -- to kill their children; a god who commands you to murder your family members if they don't adore him (Deut. 13); a god who once destroyed the entire world because a few humans displeased him, yet whose colossal ego demands incessant praise. The New Testament presents a god whose vindictive anger could be appeased only by human sacrifice, the killing of his allegedly beloved son. And so, several centuries afterward, a man dying on an instrument of torture was established as the world's most holy symbol.

Religion based on biblical legend created a hell that is sadistic beyond belief, yet is still believed. This religion has a consistently violent history of wars, crusades, pogroms, inquisitions, witch hunts, genocides and holocausts, all supported by its supernatural father figure. It instituted two millennia of severe oppression of women, with their political and economic enslavement. It has bitterly opposed almost every significant scientific or medical advancement of the past 400 years. Certainly, religious people have done good things, but the ratio of good to bad is not encouraging.

Though admittedly untrue, religious mythology still misleads, and still demands unquestioning approval of god's crimes against humanity. Its best precept, the Golden Rule, was not even Christian but plagiarized from Buddhism, whereas Christians have been history's leading doers of harm unto others. So the word "god" invokes centuries of inexcusable lies, hatreds and prejudices, and is inappropriate in an enlightened humanistic society. The traditional imagery of the god who said "I create evil" (Isaiah 45:7) remains defiant of verbal whitewash.

FINAL SAY

They ask, "Aren't you afraid of what might happen to you after you die?" Well, I don't see that what will happen to me is anything particularly fearful. One way or another, my body will dissolve into its component atoms and be reabsorbed into the surrounding environment; and along with this general dissolution will go my brain, the mechanism of my consciousness. Thus I will be unconscious forever, since I will no longer exist as a single entity. That's hardly anything frightening. I have experienced periods of unconsciousness every night of my life, and found no inconvenience in it. To me it makes perfect sense to call death the "final sleep."

"But what about God?" they ask. "Aren't you afraid that you may have to face him after all, and you might end up in a state of eternal torture?" But of course, I can hardly fear any such abuse when all the nerves and synapses of my body and brain are long gone. How can sensations exist when there is no way to feel them? Moreover, I have nothing but contempt for a God who would be so sadistic as to create eternal hells for his allegedly beloved children, and would punish the most trivial offenses with something so drastic as eternal torture. One of the Catholic church's favorite idols, St. Thomas Aquinas, revealed an amazing depth of sadism when he said that one of the greatest pleasures God would give the blessed souls in heaven would be a perfect view of all the tortures of the damned. Both Aquinas and his God fall far below my personal moral standards. So do those English Victorian clergymen who forbade anesthesia to women in childbirth, because they were sure God wanted women to suffer.

The other alternative, I was told in Sunday school, is going to heaven and spending all eternity joining the angels in singing praises to this incredibly egotistic deity who wants to be praised every second by everyone everywhere. In view of his offensive vanity, this God hasn't much to offer. Ancient sex-oriented religions claimed that paradise would resemble an eternal orgasm, but of course the patriarchal Judeo/Christian/Muslim "father" would have nothing to do with that idea. I'm not fond of choral singing, and the idea of having to do it forever sounded to me more hellish than heavenly. Surely nonexistence would be preferable to either of these alternatives.

Throughout the history of our civilization, it has been customary to locate heaven literally in the sky and hell below the earth's surface. Believers still speak of God looking "down," and address their prayers upward. But we now know perfectly well what our atmosphere consists of, and also the space beyond it. We know as well what lies under the surface of the earth, and it's not a vast torture chamber. So the physical locations of these mythological concepts have been quite effectively removed.

No, I'm not at all afraid of death, but I am afraid of dying if it means a period of being in pain. I dislike pain. My mother died many years ago in far too much pain, because the social network to give her relief did not then exist. More recently, dying people can receive palliative lethal medications, thanks to the efforts of the esteemed Dr. Kevorkian and the hospice movement. But this is still not in full legal recognition, and many religious authorities condemn it. The sainted Mother Teresa is known to withhold painkilling drugs, even aspirin, from her suffering terminally ill patients, on the ground that God intends their pain for the betterment of their souls. To my mind, the most acceptable death is one that can be painlessly administered at the patient's request. Vets give euthanasia to our beloved pets when it's necessary; why can't doctors do the same for our beloved relatives?

The real reason behind the church's centuries-old battle against suicide was simple greed. As George Carlin once remarked, what God always wants is more money. When the Inquisition was in full swing, all the property of arrested victims was immediately seized by the church, a centuries-old habit that eventually made the church the richest organization in Europe. But if the victim managed to commit suicide before being taken to the torture chamber, the church was deprived of its loot. Therefore, suicides were condemned to the nethermost levels of hell. Religion still seeks to control all of life's important occasions: birth, baptism, marriage, and death all present money-making opportunities for religions. It's tax-free income, too. Thus religious authorities want to keep these matters "holy" so they can make a profit from every ceremonial turning-point of life.

I am fortunate to have lived a long, productive, enjoyable life, and I have no problem with contemplating its end. Ever since I reached an age of reason, I have turned up my nose at this absurd hangover from a dark age, the vain, pompous, punitive all-male deity that many less-than-grownup adults seem to think they still can't live without. Some day in what I hope is the not too distant future, most of the world will finally realize how

absurd the whole idea is, and celebrations of life's beginnings and endings will become much more secular. And -- not incidentally -- last words will begin to make much more sense.

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