


Preface

 IN RECENT YEARS, attacks on religious faith have become both more common and more vicious. In books, movies, and on television, the faiths that have nurtured our civilization are increasingly portrayed as exotic new threats to an otherwise pure America. It is as if we in the West are suffering from some cultural autoimmune disorder. We are destroying our own roots.

To the extent that they contain any discernable logic, most of these critiques share the same two-point premise. They assert, in so many words, that only an idiot could believe in God and revealed religion. They then proceed to claim that idiots who believe in God and revealed religion have been responsible for most of the hatred, war, and bloodshed here on earth. Even the more scholarly of these efforts are often angry in their tone and stunningly simplistic in their analysis. Yet over the years, surprisingly few worthy retorts have emerged. This is my effort to provide one.

I decided at the outset that I would only respond to the second of these two points. No matter how cogent or complete, rational arguments alone cannot generate religious devotion. Belief in God demands a leap beyond logic—the leap of faith. Thus nowhere in this book will readers find arguments for God’s existence or exhortations to adopt any particular religious faith.

Instead, I focus entirely on rebutting the second point made by these critics: that people of faith are responsible for our greatest sorrows. This is an assertion that can be tested by reference to objective fact. And a review of the relevant history proves just how far from the truth this claim actually is.



THE STORY OF THE WEST contains chapters in which religion was too powerful. There have been times in our past when faith has ridden a wave of certainty toward a crest of intolerance. For those of us living in the West today, this is not one of those times.

We live in an era of mounting skepticism. The struggle of our time is not to seek freedom from oppressive faith. Instead, our challenge is to preserve the foundations of faith that undergird our civilization. By every measure, we in the West are rejecting religion in increasing numbers. As we turn our backs on this spiritual heritage, we are also forgetting our cultural debt—namely the Judeo-Christian source of our most cherished values. With stunning hubris, we act as if we've built the towering moral edifice in which we had the good fortune of being born.

Indeed, when it comes to our morality, too many of us are playing the role of the rebellious teenager. Our forebears sacrificed and struggled to construct, preserve, and bequeath to us a noble tradition with an elevated moral code. Yet we cannot see beyond the imperfections of this tradition to recognize the great gift at its core. And in our ingratitude and outright sabotage we slowly erode the structure that would preserve this moral heritage for our children. Yes, the sins of the fathers are sometimes visited upon the sons.



CONTRARY TO WHAT IS SO commonly assumed, we're not simply born "good." We have not evolved a greater capacity for compassion over the millennia. To the extent that human beings enter this world with any altruistic impulses, they are tragically limited.

Throughout the ages, humans have demonstrated an instinctive altruism toward their families and their tribes. As human societies grew larger and more complex, the definition of one's "tribe" has often expanded to include entire races, religions, and nation-states. Yet the one constant throughout most of human history has been that those outside this shifting zone of compassion—those not in our "ingroup"—have never been deemed

worthy of empathy or concern. These outsiders can be enslaved. And they can be killed. Slavery and genocide are hardly historical anomalies. They have been the overwhelming rule.

The radical idea at the root of the Judeo-Christian tradition is that all human beings are created in the image of God. Both Judaism and Christianity therefore stress the sanctity and equality of *all* humans. Even more importantly, these faiths demand not merely that we recognize the value of our neighbors, but also that we love them and act on this love by serving them. From the Judeo-Christian perspective, the neighborhood grows to encompass the entire world, and the ingroup swells and swallows all outgroups. Hated strangers become beloved brothers.

This belief in the equality and sanctity of all humans combined with this call to actively love them is what I refer to throughout this book as the “Judeo-Christian idea.” The Judeo-Christian idea was something new in the West. And it continues to inspire our highest ethics down to the present day. When you feel compassion for a Haitian earthquake victim or an African AIDS patient, you are feeling a connection and an altruism that is exceptional in human history. And you must thank the Judeo-Christian tradition for it. In our civilization, such love has no other source.



GIVEN THE IMPRESSIVE RECORD of the Judeo-Christian idea in the modern world, those who wish to discredit this tradition must resort to deception and demagoguery. Typically, their arguments rely upon the logical error of faulty generalization. These critics try to condemn all religion at all times by citing atrocities committed by the adherents of certain religions at certain times.

In particular, to prove that Christianity and Judaism are evil today, our atheists typically cite atrocities committed by radical Muslims. Quite often, they supplement their arguments by invoking medieval Christian atrocities. To the extent that they discuss modern Christian or Jewish violence at all, these critics

trot out the same few examples of extremist acts that were immediately and universally condemned by the very faith communities they seek to denounce.

When it comes to religion, too many otherwise astute observers are willing to accept this logical sleight of hand. They would certainly never do so in other contexts. Suppose, for example, that our topic was not religions but nations. And suppose that a critic of the United States sought to condemn our country by arguing that the Soviet Union committed many atrocities. Alternatively, imagine that this critic tried to convince us of America's present evil by enumerating centuries-old American sins. Neither argument would be the least bit persuasive. We are quite capable of making the obvious distinctions which such generalizations seek to blur.

By the same principle, citing the evil of militant Islam is hardly an indictment of Judaism, Christianity, or any other religion. In fact, the barbarity of militant Islam does not even discredit Islam as a whole, since the militants represent a minority of Muslims. Likewise, the behavior of Christians or Jews centuries ago cannot sustain a valid critique of these faiths today. The fact that so many anti-religious books and movies make such specious arguments and yet are still taken seriously shows just how skeptical of religion we have become.

The simple premise of this book is that once the focus is narrowed in two important ways, it becomes difficult to deny that faith has been an overwhelming force for good. The first limitation is one of scope: I've restricted my analysis to the Judeo-Christian tradition in the Western world. The second limitation is one of time: I've confined my review to the modern era—the past few centuries. What emerges is a record that is surprisingly clear and singularly impressive. In the modern era, the Judeo-Christian tradition has been the West's most prolific source of compassion, humanity, and human rights.



I MUST STRESS, in the clearest of terms, that this book is not a work of comparative religion. This is a book about Western civilization. Thus far, only one faith tradition—the Judeo-Christian—has had a significant role in shaping Western culture. It is certainly possible that this Judeo-Christian monopoly on our morality may erode as more Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists immigrate to the West. Yet as of this writing, such religious newcomers have yet to shape our culture to this extent.

Thus the fact that this book does not focus on other faith traditions is in no way a critique of these traditions. It is not my intention to slight any other religion or its moral code. These other faiths are simply outside of, and therefore irrelevant to, the scope of my analysis. I am the first to admit that I simply don't know enough about non-Western religions to pass even the most rudimentary of judgments upon them.

Whenever I use a superlative in connection with the Judeo-Christian tradition, therefore, I have tried to be clear that this superlative applies not on a global scale, but simply within the Western context. When I write that the Judeo-Christian tradition has been the greatest source of compassion *in the West*, it should be clear that I am in no way commenting on any of the religions which have influenced cultures in the rest of the world. If I have at times left out such limiting language, it is to avoid repetition rather than to claim superiority.

I have no doubt that some individuals who never bother to read this preface or this book will nevertheless criticize me for denigrating non-Western faiths. There is little a writer can do to protect himself from critics with strong opinions and faulty logic. And today, the blogosphere ensures that even the most dishonest of critics gets a voice. But to the extent that facts still matter in our public discourse, I have set forth my goals and intentions here in clear English.



THIS IS A BOOK about religion and politics, Christians and Jews, the righteous and the wicked. Given the controversial and personal nature of these topics, I believe it is essential that I state at the outset my own faith, background, and journey. Only then can you factor into your reading any bias I might bring to my analysis.

Starting with my religion, I am a Jew. I am a Jew not only by birth, but by faith. I am not a Messianic Jew or a Jew for Jesus—I do not believe that the Messiah has ever appeared on earth. Nor am I an alienated or self-hating Jew. I embrace my Jewish faith and seek knowledge of my Creator through the paths and texts provided to me by my Jewish ancestors. While I do not observe all of the *Halacha* (Jewish law), I do recognize the Halacha as a central component of my religion. If there be fault in my failure to observe it, the fault lies with me, not with the law.

Yet my Jewish faith does not in any way prevent me from admiring Christianity and devout Christians. On the contrary, I see a deep kinship between Judaism and Christianity. Yes, our faiths do differ on important theological questions, most notably the identity of the Messiah. But when we narrow the scope from theology to morality—the focus of this book—our two faiths are practically identical.

Thus when I see Christians doing beautiful things in the name of Christianity, I do not see outsiders serving a foreign God. Quite to the contrary, I see brothers serving the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We Jews and Christians must love and respect one another. And we should, for a change, focus on all that we share. We are brothers and sisters in faith not because we agree on everything, but because we agree on so many of the truly important things affecting our lives in this world. And these values and beliefs that we cherish are under assault both at home and abroad.

While I identify as a Jew, however, I understand well the perspective of secular critics of faith. For most of my life, this was a perspective I shared. In my younger days, I would not have

written this book. I'm quite confident that I would not even have purchased it. At the time, it was my considered opinion that the Judeo-Christian tradition had about as much to do with my morality as the religious beliefs of the early Aztecs. After all, I was a considerate, thoughtful, and at times compassionate young man, yet I had never seriously studied Judaism. It therefore seemed absurd to assert that any goodness I possessed came from a Jewish faith about which I knew so little. I was wrong.

It was only when I took a step back and examined the source of my morality that I realized the profound extent to which it is Judeo-Christian. It was only when I questioned the conventional wisdom regarding faith that I realized how flawed this conventional wisdom is. This is not a book written by someone who has never doubted God or the tenets of his faith. It is a book written by someone who has also questioned the secular orthodoxy that, today, is even more dominant and demanding.



AS I NOTED EARLIER, I never intended this book to be an argument for faith in God. Yet by the time I had finished writing it, I found that the content had nevertheless touched me at this deeper level. I hope that it will have a similar effect on others. In particular, it is my prayer that this book might contribute in some small way toward bridging a gap and solving a problem. The gap is between people of faith and the skeptics who cannot believe in a loving God. The problem is that, deep down, even the skeptics want to believe.

We are not merely a lost generation. And we are not lost only here, in America. Our predicament is much deeper and of much longer duration. Centuries of skepticism, doubt, and contempt have taken their toll. Millions of us across the Western world have been rendered spiritual eunuchs. It's not that we don't long for God. The problem is that we're incapable of consummating the relationship. Faith and grace have been drained from us, leaving only those most primitive of instincts: our obsessions

with self and things material. We are a race of accountants counting the grains of sand on our beaches. We are a tribe of technicians, fixing the hands of a clock that counts down the seconds of our lives.

Yet the desire, the longing for God—this remains. No thoughtful human can deny it. Our scientists tell us that this longing is a product of our evolution. Our scriptures tell us that this longing has been planted in us by God. The cause, quite frankly, is irrelevant. The desire is real, and it is breaking our hearts. Yet in our incapacity to believe we find ourselves staring, paralyzed, as the love of our lives disappears into the distance.

The Protestant theologian John Wesley wrote that in faith he discovered “that love of God, and of all mankind, which we had elsewhere sought in vain.” At first, I was jealous of John Wesley. I longed for the love but lacked the faith. And then it struck me: Perhaps the converse is also true. Perhaps through the love of all mankind we can find faith and God.

For even if we don’t possess faith, we still believe in love.



THE PREDICAMENT OF the lonely skeptic can be summed up as follows: We call out to God but he does not answer us. We seek the face of God, but we see nothing. God hides his face from us.

One of the great consolations of reading the Bible is the reminder it constantly provides that we are hardly the first humans to suffer whatever pain is troubling our souls at any given moment. And so it is with God’s hidden face. In the Psalms, King David cries out to God in despair, “Why, Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?” This is a theme to which David repeatedly returns in his darker moments.

David was not the first biblical figure to seek God’s face in vain. In the book of Exodus, Moses asks to see the God to whom he has so often spoken. God responds by saying that he will pass before Moses and speak his—God’s—name aloud. But God also

tells Moses, “You will not be able to see My face, for no human can see Me and live.”

In the wonderful passages that follow, God instructs Moses to seek shelter in a cleft in the rock of Mount Sinai. He explains to Moses that he is going to protect him with his hand while he passes by him. After he has passed by, God relates, he will remove his hand and allow Moses to see his back.

Then God does what he had promised. God descends to Moses in a cloud and passes before him. As he does so, God proclaims his name for Moses to hear:

The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God,
slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining
love for thousands of generations, and forgiving wickedness,
rebellion, and sin.

There is no better summary of the Judeo-Christian idea than this. In naming himself, God stresses the love, compassion, and mercy at the core of both Judaism and Christianity.

Whether or not one believes in its divine provenance, the Bible is the source of profound wisdom about the human condition. The fact is that if we seek the face of God—direct proof of his existence—we will search in vain. We must seek instead the attributes of God. Indeed, the attributes of God—his love, kindness, and mercy—are all around us.

I am too much a prisoner of my secular background and liberal education to have an easy faith. For me and so many like me, faith has always been a struggle. And it has been a struggle I have at times abandoned. But I have been privileged in recent years to work closely with men and women who love God and try their utmost to act with his love and compassion. And when I watch such wonderful people, I sometimes see in them the reflection of something very bright. When men and women of faith act on their faith to reflect the attributes of God, they are in a very concrete way bringing the divine into our world.

In the pages of this book, I share some of the most compelling examples of men and women who have lived out the love and compassion at the core of their faith and changed the world in the process. As you read these pages, I hope that you can also see in these people the reflection of a great light. I cannot prove to you that you are seeing God's back as he passes through our world. But I can promise you that this reflection—the light shining forth from those who love their fellow human beings so completely—is one of the most beautiful sights you will ever see.