

A Religion For A New Age

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This essay has been denounced since its publication. It's often quoted and denounced on line but it's never been published in its entirety on any web site. Why? Most likely because it was published so long ago. Well, here it is — *finally* placed on line by its author.

And when it was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: neither shall they say, Lo here! Or lo there! For behold, the kingdom of God is within you.

– Luke 17:20–21

Jesus said, "I have cast fire upon the world, and see, I am guarding it until it blazes."

– The Gospel of Thomas, one of the Gnostic manuscripts discovered in Nag Hamadi, Egypt, in 1945.

A short time ago I was rereading Albert Camus's masterpiece, *The Plague*, one of my favorite novels, and remember having been struck by an extraordinary bit of dialogue between Tarrou and Doctor Rieux. Although Tarrou had rejected God and any sort of personal immortality, he remained riddled with doubts as to whether an atheist society could produce humane, compassionate citizens who would respect the dignity of their fellow human beings. "Can one be a saint without God?" he asked. "That's the problem, in fact the only problem I'm up against today.

Can one really be a saint without God or, in the peculiar experience of western civilization, without Christianity? Quite frankly, I have always wondered why the burden of proof for this question has been placed on the shoulders of those, like Tarrou, who have explicitly rejected the supernatural. Whether one can be a saint without God certainly remains to be seen, but even the most cursory examination of history demonstrates that it may well be even more to be a saint with God.

When Tarrou postulated such misgivings about the morality of a world without God, he was unconsciously echoing the sentiment expressed by Voltaire, who had thought that, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him" — an assertion founded upon the dubious thesis that belief in the existence of a Supreme Being prevents humankind from degenerating into moral anarchy. God, according to this sort of reasoning, renders a most pragmatic service to civilization by acting as a cosmic policeman, constantly

reminding humankind of each person's inherent worth, thereby establishing the intrinsic value of human life and safeguarding the inalienable rights of each individual. This is undeniably the theory which was expounded by the fictional Tarrou and the veritable Voltaire, a theory which has been shared by men and women — including many humanists — through the ages. Yet it is only a theory, and a question to which we must address ourselves is this: has it been successful in achieving these goals?

The history of Christianity has been largely written in blood, the blood of those whom it has sought to proselytize as well as that of those Christians who did not share the theology or ambitions of the male clerical oligarchy that has always welded power in Christendom. This ignoble distinction is not nor has it ever been the exclusive prerogative of any particular denomination or sect; it is a living legacy of horror that is tragically common to the Roman Catholic, Protestant, and eastern Orthodox bodies of Christian churches.

If we may state that blood is the ink in which the history of Christianity has been written, we may also maintain with equal justification that the sacred book of Christianity, the Bible, has been penned with the same substance. Contemporary Christian fundamentalists who agitate for the reinstatement of “voluntary” prayer and Bible reading in our public schools commit the same error as Tarrou and Voltaire in their assumption that such practices will somehow assure that these children will grow up to be decent, moral, law-abiding citizens who will respect the rights of others. They believe that the physical proximity of a Bible, rather like some voodoo talisman or good-luck charm, will exert an almost magical influence over schoolchildren and compel them to be “good people.” But are they correct in this assumption? What sort of influence has the Christian Bible exerted in the history of Western civilization?

The fundamentalists who clamor for the expulsion of evolution from the public school classroom in favor of the Genesis account of humankind's origin taught under the guise of something called “creationism” are really continuing an old tradition as they seek to usurp science in the interest of biblical literalism. During its persecution of Galileo, the Catholic Church made much use of a biblical verse in which God caused the sun to “stand still” so that Joshua could win a military victory over the enemies of the Hebrews (Joshua 10:12–13), a passage which seemingly confirmed the geocentric theory of the universe.

Two of the most notorious passages of the entire Bible are found in Genesis 9:18–27 and Matthew 25:25. The former, chronicling Noah's cursing of his son, Ham, who was viewed as the progenitor of the of the black race, was used for centuries as proof of the

God-willed inferiority of blacks and to provide a moral justification for black slavery. The New Testament verse supposedly records the cry of the Jews to Pilate as he debated whether Jesus should be crucified. “Then answered all the people, and said, His [Jesus] blood be on us and on our children,” words which forever branded Jews as “Christ-killers” in the eyes of many Christians and fueled countless persecutions through the centuries.

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” (Exodus 22:18) was cited by the Catholic Church as demanding the horrible torture and execution of hundreds of thousands of “witches” during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Catholic and Protestant militants, both past and present, continue to refer to “Whosoever sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed for in the image of God made he man” (Genesis 9:6) as proving that capital punishment is the will of God.

Feminists have long argued that Christianity is inherently anti-woman, an accusation which is certainly corroborated by an examination of the Bible. Such passages as Paul’s writings in I Corinthians 14: 35–36, Ephesians 5:22–24, and I Timothy 2:9–15 admonish women to remain utterly servile to their husbands and to take no active role in church affairs. Protestant fundamentalists continue to quote Colossians 3:22, Titus 2:9, and I Peter 2:18, which seemingly condemn any sort of revolt whatsoever as proof that those who challenge authority are nothing more than hell-bound heretics. “Exhort servants to be obedient to their own masters” (Titus 2:9) was a favorite quotation hurled by churchmen at strikers when labor unions began fighting for the rights of working people at the beginning of the century.

Tory loyalists in colonial America sought to demonstrate the American Revolution as contrary to the will of God by quoting “Fear God. Honor the King” (I Peter 2:16), a verse that was repeatedly employed by European colonial powers and their churches, Catholic and Protestant, when their oppressed African and Asian vassals began to agitate for independence. This verse was truly a “godsend” for reactionaries.

Various New right Groups such as the Moral Majority point to Biblical passages like Galatians 6:4–5 and II Thessalonians 3:10 (“...if any would not work, neither should he eat.”) to bolster their argument that all social welfare programs are undeniably anti-Christian and repeat Paul’s condemnation of homosexuality (Romans 1:26–27, I Corinthians 6:9) as they lobby for legislation which would deprive gays of their civil rights.

The Roman Catholic Church continues to cling to the account of poor Onan being struck dead for spilling his “seed” upon the ground instead of into his sister-in-law’s vagina (Genesis 38:9–10) as comprising irrefutable proof that birth control is opposed to the law of God. Catholic and Protestant militants alike close ranks to cite Exodus 21:22 in their attempt to pass a constitutional amendment which would prohibit abortion. The story of the unborn John the Baptist leaping for joy in its mother’s womb upon hearing a salutation from the pregnant (but still virginal) Mary as recorded in Luke 1:41 is a particular favorite with the fanatical anti-abortionists for who it clearly demonstrates the intelligence, viability, and — presumably — athletic prowess of a fetus.

Perhaps the most pernicious biblical passage in terms of the devastating tyranny it has wrought over the past two centuries also appears to be one of the most innocuous upon first glance. The Gospel according to Matthew has Jesus saying to Peter:

And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:18–19)

Upon these two meager verses rests the entire weight of the Roman Catholic Church along with all its claims to temporal authority as well as its ludicrous assertion that Jesus’ words to Peter establishes its preeminence as the “One True Church” in all Christendom, an affirmation that it has repeatedly sought to implement throughout history by intimidation and persecution. Walter Lippmann once assailed the Catholic Church for directly opposing every effort of people to become independent and self-reliant, an accusation which the Church itself has constantly proved valid. Its current vehement opposition to birth control and abortion is only the most recent chapter in the saga of its persistently reactionary role in world affairs.

Perhaps more so than any other denomination, the Catholic Church must bear responsibility for the subjugation of women in the Western world. It is almost as though it has never been able to forgive Eve for inducing Adam to take a bite of that damn apple in the Garden of Eden, demonstrating that women are not to be trusted. As Erica Jong has noted, the Roman Catholic Church, as best exemplified in its idealized conception of woman in the Virgin Mary, condemns female sexuality as evil and demands that women become “female eunuchs” as the price for existing in a Catholic-patriarchal society.

Bertrand Russell, always an adamant critic of Catholicism, emphasized the extraordinary similarity between the repressive, totalitarian Roman Catholic Church and its supposed foe: the equally repressive, totalitarian force of communism. Both systems, Russell observed, are founded upon a rigid doctrine that is demonstrably false, employ persecution as a means of enforcing orthodoxy, and are ruled by an elite, centralized clique which explicitly rejects democratic principles in both theory and practice. Russell suggested that, far from having mellowed with age, the Catholic Church would undoubtedly repeat most if not all of its past abuses if it ever again attained the degree of power it enjoyed during the Middle Ages.

I think the most pithy remark regarding Roman Catholicism was made by Mary McCarthy in her autobiography when she maintained that it was a religion which brought out some of the worst traits in human nature and lent them a sort of sanctification. As one who was raised in that faith, I can unhesitatingly state that I have never found sufficient grounds to doubt the validity of that assertion.

If the previous paragraphs prove anything, it is that the Bible is not merely another book, an outmoded and archaic book, or even an extremely influential book: it has been and remains an extremely dangerous book. It and the various Christian churches which are parasitic upon it have been directly responsible for most of the wars, persecutions and outrages which humankind has perpetrated upon itself over the past two thousand years. But what of the question raised by Voltaire and Camus through the character Tarrou? Would we plunge into a new, global holocaust without God — a dreadful reign of terror infinitely more devastating than we can imagine?

The answer may be contained within the pages of a work even more remarkably than *The Plague*: Fyodor Dostoyevski's fascinating novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan Karamazov, the cynical intellectual formulates the hypothesis, "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted," and weaves the outrageous tale "The Grand Inquisitor," in which a small group of priests, recognizing the absurdity of life without God, rules over the rest of humanity. But I believe Ivan's hypothesis to be in error. If God does not exist, it does not logically follow that everything is permitted but, rather, that "all are responsible for all" in the words of the saintly elder Father Zossima. If God has failed in his role as cosmic policeman and if Christianity has failed to uphold the dignity of humankind and to protect the inalienable rights of all — and who can argue with either hypothesis — then a viable alternative must be sought. That alternative is humanism.

I am convinced that the battle for humankind's future must be waged and won in the public school classroom by teachers who correctly perceive their role as the

proselytizers of a new faith: a religion of humanity that recognizes and respects the spark of what theologians call divinity in every human being. These teachers must embody the same selfless dedication as the most rabid fundamentalist preachers, for they will be ministers of another sort, utilizing a classroom instead of a pulpit to convey humanists values in whatever subject they teach, regardless of the educational level — preschool day care or large state university. The classroom must and will become an arena of conflict between the old and the new — the rotting corpse of Christianity, together with all its adjacent evils and misery, and the new faith of humanism, resplendent in its promise of a world in which the never-realized Christian ideal of “love thy neighbor” will finally be achieved.

Then, perhaps, we will be able to say with Tom Paine that “the world is my country, all [hu]mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion.” It will undoubtedly be a long, arduous struggle replete with much sorrow and many tears, but humanism will emerge triumphant. It must if the family of humankind is to survive.

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