

XXI

WOKE

2015: ROSTOCK

‘Politics is sometimes hard.’ Angela Merkel, speaking to an audience of teenagers in the gymnasium of their school, knew what she was talking about. Brought up under communist rule, she had risen to become chancellor of a united Germany, Europe’s largest and most important economy. Ten years in office had taught her that decisions rarely came without cost. Now, live on television, she found herself face to face with what one of her policies might mean for a fourteen-year-old girl. Reem Sahwil, a Palestinian born in a refugee camp, had travelled to Germany to be treated for cerebral palsy. Fluent in German and top of her class, she had proven a model immigrant. Why, then, did she and her family face deportation? Merkel, visibly uncomfortable, sought to explain. ‘You know that in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon there are thousands and thousands, and if we were to say you can all come, and you from Africa, you can all come here – we just couldn’t manage.’ Turning to the moderator, she sought to elaborate – but then, mid-sentence, paused. Sahwil had begun to cry. Merkel, going over to her, touched her awkwardly, then stroked her hair. ‘I know it’s difficult for you.’ Sahwil, blinking back tears, tried to smile. Merkel, her hand resting on the girl’s shoulder, consoled her as best she could. ‘You have explained very well a situation that many others find themselves in.’¹

The key to staying at the top in politics, the Chancellor understood, was to take the path of least resistance. Hostility to migrants was a timeless

emotion. Rulers had been putting up walls since the beginnings of civilisation. Violence against people who looked and sounded different had been a constant throughout history. A couple of decades previously, Rostock itself had been convulsed by two days of rioting against refugees. Back then, in 1992, the sight of people from distant continents on the city's streets had been unusual. Europeans belonged to a civilisation that had long been exceptional for its degree of cultural homogeneity. For centuries, pretty much everyone – with the exception of the occasional community of Jews – had been Christian. Otto the Great's victory over the Hungarians had marked a decisive turning point in the ability of outsiders to penetrate the heartlands of Christendom. Nowhere else in Eurasia had stood so secure against the mounted archers who tended otherwise to dominate the medieval battlefield. Only with the expansion of Ottoman power, which twice brought Muslim armies to the very gates of Vienna, had Christian Europe faced a serious threat from adversaries who did not subscribe to its own faith. Even that had ended in retreat. Increasingly, as their fleets swept distant oceans, their flags fluttered over distant colonies, and their emigrants settled across the world, Europeans had been able to take for granted the impregnability of their own continent. Mass migration was something that they brought to the lands of non-Europeans – not the other way round.

Since the end of the Second World War, however, that had changed. Attracted by higher living standards, large numbers of immigrants from non-European countries had come to settle in Western Europe. For decades, the pace and scale of immigration into Germany had been carefully regulated; but now it seemed that control was at risk of breaking down. Merkel, explaining the facts to a sobbing teenager, knew full well the crisis that, even as she spoke, was building beyond Germany's frontiers. All that summer, thousands upon thousands of migrants and refugees from Muslim countries had been moving through the Balkans. The spectacle stirred deeply atavistic fears. In Hungary, there was talk of a new Ottoman invasion. Even in Western Europe, in lands that had never been conquered by Muslim armies, there were many who felt a sense of unease. Dread that

all the East might be on the move reached back a long way. ‘The plain was dark with their marching companies, and as far as eyes could strain in the mirk there sprouted, like a foul fungus growth, all about the beleaguered city great camps of tents, black or sombre red.’² So Tolkien, writing in 1946, had described the siege of Minas Tirith, bulwark of the free lands of the West, by the armies of Sauron. The climax of *The Lord of the Rings* palpably echoed the momentous events of 955: the attack on Augsburg and the battle of the Lech. A wise and battle-seasoned scholar, consecrated in his mission by a supernatural power, standing in the gateway of a breached city and blocking the enemy’s advance. An army of mail-clad horsemen arriving to contend the battlefield just as the invaders seemed to have victory in their grasp. A king armed with a sacred weapon, laying claim to an empty imperial throne. In 2003, a film of *The Lord of the Rings* had brought Aragorn’s victory over the snarling hordes of Mordor to millions who had never heard of the battle of the Lech. Burnished and repackaged for the twenty-first century, Otto’s defence of Christendom still possessed a spectral glamour.

Its legacy, though, that summer of 2014, was shaded by multiple ironies. Otto’s mantle was taken up not by the chancellor of Germany, but by the prime minister of Hungary. Victor Orbán had until recently been a self-avowed atheist; but this did not prevent him from doubting – much as Otto might have done – whether unbaptised migrants could ever truly be integrated. ‘This is an important question, because Europe and European culture have Christian roots.’ That September, ordering police to remove refugees from trains and put up fences along Hungary’s southern border, he warned that Europe’s soul was at stake. Merkel, as she tracked the migrant crisis, had come to an identical conclusion. Her response, however, was the opposite of Orbán’s. Although pressed by ministers in her own ruling coalition to close Germany’s borders, she refused. Huge crowds of Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis began crossing into Bavaria. Soon, upwards of ten thousand a day were pouring in. Crowds gathered at railway stations to cheer them; football fans raised banners at matches to proclaim them

welcome. The scenes, the chancellor declared, ‘painted a picture of Germany which can make us proud of our country’.³

Merkel, no less than Orbán, stood in the shadow of her people’s history. She knew where a dread of being swamped by aliens might lead. Earlier generations had been more innocent. Tolkien, when he drew on episodes from early medieval history for the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*, had never meant to equate the Hungarians or the Saracens with the monstrous evil embodied by Mordor. The age of migrations was sufficiently remote, he had assumed, that there was little prospect of his readers believing that. He had never had any intention of demonising entire peoples – ancient or modern. ‘I’m very anti that kind of thing.’⁴ Sauron’s armies, although they might come from the east, symbolised the capacity for murderousness that Tolkien had seen for himself on the Western Front. Hell’s shadow knew no national boundaries. Its reach was universal. Already, though – even as Tolkien was writing his account of the siege of Minas Tirith – the long reign of the Devil as its embodiment was drawing to a close. Evil had come to wear a new face. In 1946 the trial had opened in Nuremberg of the most prominent surviving members of the Nazi leadership. A year on from the liberation of Auschwitz, reports of the proceedings had made clear to the world the full scale of Nazism’s crimes. Like dry rot spreading back through time, the horror of it had served to contaminate the entire fabric of German history. Himmler, a man whose loathing for Christianity had not prevented him from admiring the martial feats of Christian emperors, had hallowed Otto’s father as the supreme model of Germanic heroism. It was darkly rumoured that he claimed to be the Saxon king’s reincarnation. Hitler, although privately contemptuous of Himmler’s more mystical leanings, had himself been obsessed by the Holy Lance. A relic of the crucifixion had been transmogrified into an emblem of Nazism. Seventy years on from Hitler’s suicide, in a country still committed to doing penance for his crimes, there had never been any prospect of Angela Merkel riding to fight a new battle of the Lech. The truly, the only Christian thing to do, faced by the flood-tide of misery lapping at Europe’s borders, was to abandon any lingering sense of the continent as Christendom, and open it up to the wretched of the earth.

Always, from the very beginnings of the Church, there had been tension between Christ's commandment to his followers that they should go into the world and preach the good news to all creation, and his parable of the Good Samaritan. Merkel was familiar with both. Her father had been a pastor, her mother no less devout. Her childhood home had been a hostel for people with disabilities – people much like Reem Sahwil. 'The daily message was: Love your neighbour as yourself. Not just German people. God loves everybody.'⁵ For two millennia, Christians had been doing their best to put these teachings into practice. Merkel, by providing refuge to the victims of war in the Middle East, was doing nothing that Gregory of Nyssa, sixteen centuries previously, had not similarly done. Offer charity, he had urged his congregants, for the spectacle of refugees living like animals was a reproach to every Christian. 'Their roof is the sky. For shelter they use porticos, alleys, and the deserted corners of the town. They hide in the cracks of walls like owls.'⁶ Yet Merkel, when she sought to justify the opening of her country's borders – a volte-face all the more dramatic for seeming so out of character – pointedly refused to frame it as a gesture of Christian charity. Six weeks after telling a sobbing girl that Germany could never play Good Samaritan to the entire world, her new take was to insist that she was merely doing what anyone in her position would do. Her own faith was irrelevant. A morality existed that trumped all differences of culture – and differences of religion too. It was with this argument that Merkel sought to parry the objection of Orbán that a Muslim influx into Europe risked irrevocably transforming the Christian character of the continent. Islam, in its essentials, was little different from Christianity. Both might equally be framed within the bounds of a liberal, secular state. Islam, the chancellor insisted – slapping down any members of her own party who dared suggest otherwise – belonged in Germany.

Yet this position was not quite the polar opposite of Orbán's that it appeared to be. Implicit within the anxieties of the Hungarian prime minister about 'a new mixed, Islamised Europe'⁷ was the assumption that Muslims, if they were only willing to accept baptism, might then take their place within the continent's Christian order. This, after all, was the lesson

taught by his own people's history. A couple of generations on from the Lech, and the king of Hungary had been sent a replica of the Holy Lance by the pope. Residency visas had rarely come so sanctified. Not for Merkel, though, anything that smacked of Holy Lances. As the leader of a country that within living memory had wiped out six million Jews, she was understandably anxious not to appear prescriptive about what might constitute European identity. Nevertheless, there was no bucking history. Germany remained, in its assumptions about how a society should best be structured, profoundly and distinctively Christian. As in the nineteenth century, when Jews had won citizenship of Prussia, Muslims who wished to integrate into German society had no choice but to become practitioners of that decidedly Christian concept: a 'religion'. *Islam* – which traditionally had signified to those who practised it merely the activity of submission – had to be moulded, and twisted, and transmuted into something very different. This was not, of course, a process that had begun in 2015. For a century and a half, ever since the heyday of European colonialism, it had been picking up speed. Its progress could be measured by the number of Muslims across the world brought to accept that laws authored by humans might trump those authored by God; that Muhammad's mission had been religious rather than political; that the relationship of worshippers to their faith was, in its essentials, something private and personal. Merkel, when she insisted that Islam belonged in Germany just as much as Christianity, was only appearing to be even-handed. To hail a religion for its compatibility with a secular society was decidedly not a neutral gesture. Secularism was no less bred of the sweep of Christian history than were Orbán's barbed-wire fences.

Naturally, for it to function as its exponents wished it to function, this could never be admitted. The West, over the duration of its global hegemony, had become skilled in the art of repackaging Christian concepts for non-Christian audiences. A doctrine such as that of human rights was far likelier to be signed up to if its origins among the canon lawyers of medieval Europe could be kept concealed. The insistence of United Nations agencies on 'the antiquity and broad acceptance of the conception of the

rights of man’⁸ was a necessary precondition for their claim to a global, rather than a merely Western, jurisdiction. Secularism, in an identical manner, depended on the care with which it covered its tracks. If it were to be embraced by Jews, or Muslims, or Hindus as a neutral holder of the ring between them and people of other faiths, then it could not afford to be seen as what it was: a concept that had little meaning outside of a Christian context. In Europe, the secular had for so long been secularised that it was easy to forget its ultimate origins. To sign up to its premises was unavoidably to become just that bit more Christian. Merkel, welcoming Muslims to Germany, was inviting them to take their place in a continent that was not remotely neutral in its understanding of religion: a continent in which the division of church and state was absolutely assumed to apply to Islam.

To secularists battle-hardened in their long fight against the myths of Christianity – what *Charlie Hebdo*, a French satirical magazine, summed up as ‘the myth of a God as architect of the universe, the myth of Mary’s virginity, the myth of Christ’s resurrection’⁹ – it was easy to forget that secularism too was founded on a myth. In France – more, perhaps, than anywhere else in Europe – the story told of its origins stood at variance with its history. *Laïcité*, among its more fiery partisans, was valued less as a separation of church from state than as a quarantining of religion from those who might otherwise be infected by its nonsense. *Charlie Hebdo* defined itself proudly as ‘*laïc*, joyful and atheist’.¹⁰ With its scabrous satirising of popes and priests, it laid claim to what, for two hundred years and more, had been a peculiarly French brand of anti-clericalism. Its roots, though, reached back much further than the Revolution. The cartoonists of *Charlie Hebdo*, when they mocked Christ, or the Virgin, or the saints, tended to an obscenity that owed little to Voltaire. Their true line of inheritance could be traced back instead to a far more rambunctious generation of iconoclasts. Back in the first flush of the Reformation, revellers had exulted in their desecration of idols: ducking a statue of the Virgin in a river as a witch, pinning asses’ ears to an image of St Francis, parading a crucifix through brothels, and bath-houses, and taverns. To trample on superstition was to

lay claim to the light. To be enlightened was, in turn, to lay claim to a status as the people of God – the *laicus*. The journalists of *Charlie Hebdo*, then, were doubly *laïc*. The tradition in which they stood – of satire, of blasphemy, of desecration – was not a repudiation of Christian history, but its very essence. For five hundred years, Catholics had repeatedly been obliged to test their faith against it. Now it was the turn of Muslims. In 2011, a cartoon of Muhammad appeared on the cover of *Charlie Hebdo*. The following year he was depicted crouching on all fours, his genitals bared. The mockery would not cease, so *Charlie Hebdo*'s editor vowed, until 'Islam has been rendered as banal as Catholicism'.¹¹ This it was, in a secular society, for Muslims to be treated as equals.

Except that they were not being treated as equals. Only those who believed in the foundation myths of secularism – that it had emerged as though from a virgin birth, that it owed nothing to Christianity, that it was neutral between all religions – could possibly have believed that they were. In January 2015, after two gunmen had forced their way into the *Charlie Hebdo* offices and shot dead twelve of the staff, Muslim sensitivities were repeatedly weighed in the balance by a bewildered and frightened public, and found wanting. Why the murderous over-reaction to a few cartoons? Why, when Catholics had again and again demonstrated themselves capable of swallowing blasphemies directed against their faith, could Muslims not do the same? Was it not time for Islam to grow up and enter the modern world, just as Christianity had done? Yet to ask these questions was, of course, to buy into the core conceit of secularism: that all religions were essentially the same. It was to assume that they were bound, much like butterflies, to replicate an identical life cycle: reformation, enlightenment, decline. Above all, it was to ignore the degree to which the tradition of secularism upheld by *Charlie Hebdo*, far from an emancipation from Christianity, was indelibly a product of it. Three days after the shootings, as world leaders marched alongside millions of demonstrators through the heart of Paris, placards declared solidarity with the murdered journalists: '*Je suis Charlie*'. As a spectacle, it was a powerful demonstration of what had become the West's guiding orthodoxy: one that had been millennia in

the evolving. Back in the age of Otto, there had been no settling in Christendom for pagan chieftains without baptism. Now, in the age of *Charlie Hebdo*, Europe had new expectations, new identities, new ideals. None, though, was neutral; none was anything other than the fruit of Christian history. To imagine otherwise, to imagine that the values of secularism might indeed be timeless, was – ironically enough – the surest evidence of just how deeply Christian they were.

Blessed be the Fruit

To visit the Peninsula Beverly Hills was to visit a hotel where guests were treated like gods. Set discreetly behind vine-covered walls, within striking distance of the luxury shopping on Rodeo Drive, and replete with spas, swimming pools and award-winning restaurants, it played host to a clientele as exclusive as any in the world. There were singers recording albums; film stars recovering from plastic surgery; titans of the movie industry cutting deals. Harvey Weinstein, for decades one of the most successful independent producers in the world, never stayed anywhere else when visiting Los Angeles. Checking in to the hotel, he would hold court in a particularly opulent suite on the fourth floor. Actresses invited upstairs to discuss forthcoming projects might find themselves surrounded by ice buckets of champagne and plates piled high with lobster. No effort was spared by the hotel to accommodate Weinstein's tastes. Great care was taken to provide him with the correct size of bathrobe. The bathroom was furnished with his preferred brand of toilet paper. His assistants were given personalised stationery. Nothing was too much trouble for a man of Harvey Weinstein's importance.

Everything at the Peninsula had to be perfect. Naturally, this required an army of staff. Receptionists, pedicurists, waiters. Early every morning, changing into their uniforms, packing their cleaning carts, housekeepers would ready themselves for a long day of making beds and scrubbing toilets. The average hourly wage paid a chambermaid in the United States was \$9.51. A suite in the Peninsula might easily cost over two thousand

dollars a night. Between a movie tycoon in his personalised bath robe and the woman tidying up his wet towels there was an almost vertiginous imbalance of power. Perhaps it was only to be expected, then, that the occasional guest, accustomed to having his every whim catered to, should have been tempted to view the staff themselves as commodities. ‘They treat workers like their property,’¹² complained one housekeeper in 2016, after she had twice been offered money in exchange for a massage. Another that same year was cornered by a guest and violently molested. Another was assaulted by a fellow worker. Even incidents such as these – the ones that were reported – were only the tip of the iceberg. Across the country, so a 2016 survey reported, one in four women was liable to experience sexual harassment in her workplace. In hotels, the figures were considerably higher. For any woman, but especially for a woman in a precarious, low-wage job, often not speaking English, and perhaps without the proper papers, there was risk in jobs that might require her to be alone with an unknown man. To work as a housekeeper, a government commission concluded, was to be ‘particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and assault’.¹³

So it had always been. Back in the Middle Ages, Bernard of Clairvaux – a contemporary of Abelard’s, and an abbot of such formidable sanctity that he had ended up both a saint and a Doctor of the Church – had lamented the sheer tempestuousness of male sexual need. ‘To be always with a woman and not to have sexual relations with her is more difficult than to raise the dead.’¹⁴ The entire point of the chastity to which monks like Bernard had pledged themselves was that it was not easy. It obliged them to fit their desires with bit and rein, and serve as models of self-control. Not every man, of course, had the fortitude to live as a monk; but even those who could not live without sex had been expected to marry, and commit themselves to a life long fidelity. The Reformation – for all the scorn with which its partisans had dismissed the ideal of chastity as monkish superstition – had served, if anything, to place an even greater premium on the sacral quality of marriage. As the Church was to Christ, so a woman was to her husband. The man who treated his wife brutally, forcing himself

on her, paying no attention to her pleasure, treating her as he might a prostitute, dishonoured God. Mutual respect was all. Sex between a married couple should be ‘an holy kind of rejoicing and solacing themselves’.¹⁵

Beverly Hills, though, rarely played host to puritans. Hollywood was Babylon. It did not make its money by selling prudery. It made it by selling cool. Back in 1994, Weinstein had enjoyed his breakout hit as a producer with *Pulp Fiction*, a movie set in the criminal underworld of Los Angeles. Electrifyingly amoral, it had alchemised sex and violence into box-office millions. Such echoes as there were in its script of the values upheld by Saint Bernard or the Pilgrim Fathers existed – like the cocaine periodically snorted in the film by Mia Wallace, wife of a local crime boss – to liven things up. Getting medieval in *Pulp Fiction* was something that gangsters did on people’s asses; the Old Testament was there to be misquoted as heavies filled their victims full of lead. Even when one hitman, convinced that God has personally intervened to spare him death, has a spiritual awakening, everyone else in the movie regards him with blank incomprehension. ‘You read the Bible, Ringo?’ the hitman asks an English robber, his gun pointed at the his head.* The reply might just as easily have been given by the vast majority of those who occupied the commanding heights of America’s entertainment industry: ‘Not regularly, no.’

Drugs, violence, money: *Pulp Fiction* fashioned adrenalin-fuelled entertainment out of the human appetite for all of them. The only limit on pleasure was the threat of violence. No other impetus to self-restraint existed. That, for the movie’s audience, was precisely the thrill. The sheen of coolness that clung to *Pulp Fiction* was the sheen, in large part, of the taboo. America was a country shaped by a tradition that, for two thousand years, had sought to regulate desire. Sexual appetite, in particular, had always been regarded by Christians with mingled suspicion and anxiety. This was why, beginning with Paul, such a supreme effort had been made to keep its currents flowing along a single course. Increasingly, however, the dams and dykes erected to channel it had begun to spring leaks. Whole sections had eroded. Others appeared to have vanished altogether beneath the floodwaters. Self-restraint had come to be cast as repression; summons

to sexual continence as hypocrisy. It did not help that Church leaders themselves, brought under the spotlight of an ever less deferential media, had repeatedly been exposed as committing the very sins that they warned their flocks against. For decades, the moral authority of the Catholic Church in America had been corroded by accusations of child abuse brought against thousands of its priests, and of cover-ups by its hierarchy. Meanwhile, among Protestants, it seemed that a televangelist had only to fulminate against sexual impropriety to be caught having an affair or arrested in a public convenience. Yet there was, of course, in the failure of priests and pastors to live up to their own teaching, nothing new. 'We are all naturally prone to hypocrisy.'¹⁶ So Calvin had acknowledged. The flesh was weak. The change – and it was one that had occurred with a startling rapidity – was the readiness of people to accept that the exacting ideals of Christian sexual morality might not be ideals at all.

That erotic desires were natural, and therefore good, and that the coming of Christianity had been like a blast of grey breath on the world, had long been a conviction popular with the more aristocratic class of free-thinker. 'Our religions, our manners and customs may easily and indeed must perforce deceive us,' as the Marquis de Sade had put it, 'whilst we shall certainly never be misled by the voice of Nature.'¹⁷ This, over the course of the 1960s, had become a manifesto shared by millions. The Summer of Love had been a celebration of body as well as of spirit. 'Make love, not war,' the hippies urged. To many, it had seemed that two thousand years of neurosis and self-hatred were being banished upon the weaving of flowers in the hair. Desires natural to men and women, long kept in check, had at last been restored to freedom. Once again, the moving of the phallus in the bright womb of the world was praised as something precious: as 'the victory of yes and love'.¹⁸ One music journalist, writing in San Francisco as 1967 turned to fall, had cast America as a stagnant swamp suddenly brought to life by the shimmering through its waters of a god. Ralph Gleason, the founder of *Rolling Stone*, most successful of all the many magazines inspired by the counter-culture of the 1960s, had identified its spirit of

sexual freedom with that of classical Greece. Society, he had declared, was being ‘deeply stirred by Dionysiac currents’.¹⁹ The ancient gods were back.

Except that the freedom to fuck when and as one liked had tended to be, in antiquity, the perk of a very exclusive sub-section of society: powerful men. Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus: all had been habitual rapists. So too, in the Rome to which Paul had travelled with his unsettling message of sexual continence, had been many a head of household. Only the titanic efforts of Christian moralists, the labour of a millennium and more, had managed to recalibrate this. Their insistence on marriage as the only legitimate way to obtain erotic fulfilment had prevailed. ‘Do you not know,’ Paul had demanded of the Corinthians, ‘that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?’²⁰ This was the message, two thousand years later, that continued to be thundered forth from pulpits across America: the warning that sexual desire, implicated as it was in the cosmic battle between good and evil, was far too predatory, far too rapacious, ever to be left to its own devices. But it was also a message that, in the offices of men who had their fingers on the pulse of popular entertainment, who knew what sold a movie, tended to be regarded with, if not contempt, then incomprehension. Sexual repression was boring – and to be boring was box-office death.

How much leeway did this give a movie mogul to behave like an Olympian god? On 5 October 2017, allegations about what Harvey Weinstein had been getting up to in his fourth-floor suite at the Peninsula broke in the *New York Times*. An actress meeting him there for what she had thought was a business breakfast had found the producer wearing nothing but his bespoke bathrobe. Perhaps, he had suggested, she could give him a massage? Or how about watching him shower? Two assistants who had met with Weinstein in his suite reported similar encounters. Over the weeks and months that followed, further allegations were levelled against him: harassment, assault, rape. Among the more than eighty women going public with accusations was Uma Thurman, the actor who had played Mia Wallace in *Pulp Fiction*, and become the movie’s pin-up. Meanwhile, where celebrity forged a path, many other women followed. A campaign

that urged women to report incidents of harassment or assault under the hashtag #MeToo actively sought to give a voice to the most marginalised and vulnerable of all: janitors, fruit-pickers, hotel housekeepers. Already that year, the summons to a great moral awakening, a call for men everywhere to reflect on their sins, and repent them, had been much in the air. On 21 January, a million women had marched through Washington, DC. Other, similar demonstrations had been held around the world. The previous day, a new president, Donald J. Trump, had been inaugurated in the American capital. He was, to the organisers of the women's marches, the very embodiment of toxic masculinity: a swaggering tycoon who had repeatedly been accused of sexual assault, who had bragged of grabbing 'pussy', and who, during the recently concluded presidential campaign, had paid hush money to a porn star. Rather than make the marches about Trump, however, the organisers had sought a loftier message: to sound a clarion call against injustice, and discrimination, and oppression wherever it might be found. 'Yes, it's about feminism. But it's about more than that. It's about basic equality for all people.'²¹

The echo, of course, was of Martin Luther King. Repeatedly, in the protests against misogyny that swept America during the first year of Trump's presidency, the name and example of the great Baptist preacher were invoked. Yet Christianity, which for King had been the fount of everything he ever campaigned for, appeared to many who marched in 2017 part of the problem. Evangelicals had voted in large numbers for Trump. Roiled by issues that seemed to them not just unbiblical, but directly antithetical to God's purposes – abortion, gay marriage, transgender rights – they had held their noses and backed a man who, pussy-grabbing and porn stars notwithstanding, had unblushingly cast himself as the standard-bearer for Christian values. Unsurprisingly, then, hypocrisy had been added to bigotry on the charge sheet levelled against them by progressives. America, it seemed to many feminists, risked becoming a misogynist theocracy. Three months after the Women's March, a television series made gripping drama out of this dread. *The Handmaid's Tale* was set in a country returned to a particularly nightmarish vision of seventeenth-century New England.

Adapted from a dystopian novel by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, it provided female protestors against Trump with a striking new visual language of protest. White bonnets and red cloaks were the uniform worn by ‘handmaids’: women whose ability to reproduce had rendered them, in a world crippled by widespread infertility, the objects of legalised rape. Licence for the practice was provided by an episode in the Bible. The parody of Evangelicals was as dark as it was savage. *The Handmaid’s Tale* – as all great dystopian fiction tends to be – was less prophecy than satire. The TV series cast Trump’s America as a society rent in two: between conservatives and liberals; between reactionaries and progressives; between dark-souled televangelists and noble-hearted foes of patriarchy.

Yet the divisions satirised by *The Handmaid’s Tale* were in truth very ancient. They derived ultimately, not from the specifics of American politics in the twenty-first century, but from the very womb of Christianity. Blessed be the fruit. There had always existed, in the hearts of the Christian people, a tension between the demands of tradition and the claims of progress, between the prerogatives of authority and the longing for reformation, between the letter and the spirit of the law. The twenty-first century marked, in that sense, no radical break with what had gone before. That the great battles in America’s culture war were being fought between Christians and those who had emancipated themselves from Christianity was a conceit that both sides had an interest in promoting. It was no less of a myth for that. In reality, Evangelicals and progressives were both recognisably bred of the same matrix. If opponents of abortion were the heirs of Macrina, who had toured the rubbish tips of Cappadocia looking for abandoned infants to rescue, then those who argued against them were likewise drawing on a deeply rooted Christian supposition: that every woman’s body was her own, and to be respected as such by every man. Supporters of gay marriage were quite as influenced by the Church’s enthusiasm for monogamous fidelity as those against it were by biblical condemnations of men who slept with men. To install transgender toilets might indeed seem an affront to the Lord God, who had created male and female; but to refuse kindness to the persecuted was to offend against the

most fundamental teachings of Christ. In a country as saturated in Christian assumptions as the United States, there could be no escaping their influence – even for those who imagined that they had. America’s culture wars were less a war against Christianity than a civil war between Christian factions.

In 1963, when Martin Luther King addressed hundreds of thousands of civil rights protestors assembled in Washington, he had aimed his speech at the country beyond the capital as well – at an America that was still an unapologetically Christian nation. By 2017, things were different. Among the four co-chairs of the Women’s March was a Muslim. Marching through Washington were Sikhs, Buddhists, Jews. Huge numbers had no faith at all. Even the Christians among the organisers flinched from attempting to echo the prophetic voice of a Martin Luther King. Nevertheless, their manifesto was no less based in theological presumptions than that of the civil rights movement had been. Implicit in #MeToo was the same call to sexual continence that had reverberated throughout the Church’s history. Protestors who marched in the red cloaks of handmaids were summoning men to exercise control over their lusts just as the Puritans had done. Appetites that had been hailed by enthusiasts for sexual liberation as Dionysiac stood condemned once again as predatory and violent. The human body was not an object, not a commodity to be used by the rich and powerful as and when they pleased. Two thousand years of Christian sexual morality had resulted in men as well as women widely taking this for granted. Had it not, then #MeToo would have had no force.

The tracks of Christian theology, Nietzsche had complained, wound everywhere. In the early twenty-first century, they led – as they had done in earlier ages – in various and criss-crossing directions. They led towards TV stations on which televangelists preached the headship of men over women; and they led as well towards gender studies departments, in which Christianity was condemned for heteronormative marginalisation of LGBTQIA+. Nietzsche had foretold it all. God might be dead, but his shadow, immense and dreadful, continued to flicker even as his corpse lay cold. Feminist academics were no less in thrall to it, no less its acolytes, than were the most fire-breathing preachers. God could not be eluded

simply by refusing to believe in his existence. Any condemnation of Christianity as patriarchal and repressive derived from a framework of values that was itself utterly Christian. ‘The measure of a man’s compassion for the lowly and the suffering comes to be the *measure* of the *loftiness of his soul*.’²² It was this, the epochal lesson taught by Jesus’ death on the cross, that Nietzsche had always most despised about Christianity. Two thousand years on, and the discovery made by Christ’s earliest followers – that to be a victim might be a source of power – could bring out millions onto the streets. Wealth and rank, in Trump’s America, were not the only indices of status. So too were their opposites. Against the priapic thrust of towers fitted with gold-plated lifts, the organisers of the Women’s March sought to invoke the authority of those who lay at the bottom of the pile. The last were to be first, and the first were to be last. Yet how to measure who ranked as the last and the first? As they had ever done, all the multiple intersections of power, all the various dimensions of stratification in society, served to marginalise some more than others. Women marching to demand equality with men always had to remember – if they were wealthy, if they were educated, if they were white – that there were many among them whose oppression was greater by far than their own: ‘Black women, indigenous women, poor women, immigrant women, disabled women, Muslim women, lesbian, queer and trans women.’²³ The disadvantaged too might boast their own hierarchy.

That it was the fate of rulers to be brought down from their thrones, and the humble to be lifted up, was a reflection that had always prompted anxious Christians to check their privilege. It had inspired Paulinus to give away his wealth, and Francis to strip himself naked before the bishop of Assisi, and Elizabeth of Hungary to toil in a hospital as a scullery maid. Similarly, a dread of damnation, a yearning to be gathered into the ranks of the elect, a desperation to be cleansed of original sin, had provided, from the very moment the Pilgrim Fathers set sail, the surest and most fertile seedbed for the ideals of the American people. Repeatedly, over the course of their history, preachers had sought to awaken them to a sense of their guilt, and to offer them salvation. Now, in the twenty-first century, there

were summons to a similar awakening. When, in October 2017, the leaders of the Women's March organised a convention in Detroit, one panel in particular found itself having to turn away delegates. 'Confronting White Womanhood' offered white feminists the chance to acknowledge their own entitlement, to confess their sins and to be granted absolution. The opportunity was for the rich and the educated to have their eyes opened; to stare the reality of injustice in the face; truly to be awakened. Only through repentance was salvation to be obtained. The conveners, though, were not merely addressing the delegates in the conference hall. Their gaze, as the gaze of preachers in America had always been, was fixed on the world beyond. Their summons was to sinners everywhere. Their ambition was to serve as a city on a hill.

Christianity, it seemed, had no need of actual Christians for its assumptions still to flourish. Whether this was an illusion, or whether the power held by victims over their victimisers would survive the myth that had given it birth, only time would tell. As it was, the retreat of Christian belief did not seem to imply any necessary retreat of Christian values. Quite the contrary. Even in Europe – a continent with churches far emptier than those in the United States – the trace elements of Christianity continued to infuse people's morals and presumptions so utterly that many failed even to detect their presence. Like dust particles so fine as to be invisible to the naked eye, they were breathed in equally by everyone: believers, atheists, and those who never paused so much as to think about religion.

Had it been otherwise, then no one would ever have got woke.

The Weak Things of the World

Writing this book, I have often found myself thinking about my godmother. Deborah Gillingham died in 2009, but because I loved her very much, and because she was a constant presence during my childhood, my memories of her have never faded. This may seem, in a book that has spanned millennia, a self-indulgent note on which to end; but the story it tells, the story of how Christianity transformed the world, would never have happened without

people like my Aunty Deb. A committed and faithful member of the Church of England, she took her duties as my godmother with the utmost seriousness. Having vowed at my baptism to see that I was brought up in the Christian faith and life, she did her best to keep her word. She never allowed me to forget that Easter was about much more than the chocolate eggs that she annually lavished on me. She bought me my first children's Bible, lovingly selected because it featured vibrant illustrations of pharaohs and centurions, and she knew me well enough to understand that this was the best way to ensure that I would read it. Above all, through her unfailing kindness, she provided me with a model of what, to a committed Christian, the daily practice of her faith could actually mean. At the time, of course, I did not think of her in these terms. She was just Aunty Deb. But over the years, as I read more and more about the great sweep of Christian history, about crusades, and inquisitions, and religious wars, about popes with fat, jewelled fingers and Puritans with stern, beetling frowns, and about all the great shocks and convulsions that Christianity had brought to the world, I found myself thinking of her more and more as a part of this same story. Which in turn means that I am a part of it as well.

I have sought, in writing this book, to be as objective as possible. Yet this, when dealing with a theme such as Christianity, is not to be neutral. To claim, as I most certainly do, that I have sought to evaluate fairly both the achievements and the crimes of Christian civilisation is not to stand outside its moral frameworks, but rather – as Nietzsche would have been quick to point out – to stand within them. The people who, in his famous fable, continue to venerate the shadow of God are not just church-goers. All those in thrall to Christian morality – even those who may be proud to array themselves among God's murderers – are included among their number. Inevitably, to attempt the tracing of Christianity's impact on the world is to cover the rise and fall of empires, the actions of bishops and kings, the arguments of theologians, the course of revolutions, the planting of crosses around the world. It is, in particular, to focus on the doings of men. Yet that hardly tells the whole story. I have written much in this book about churches, and monasteries, and universities; but these were never where the

mass of the Christian people were most influentially shaped. It was always in the home that children were likeliest to absorb the revolutionary teachings that, over the course of two thousand years, have come to be so taken for granted as almost to seem human nature. The Christian revolution was wrought above all at the knees of women.

The success, then, of the most influential framework for making sense of human existence that has ever existed always depended on people like my godmother: people who saw in the succession of one generation by another something more than merely the way of all the earth. Although she had no children of her own, she was a teacher, the headmistress of a much-garlanded school, and publicly honoured for it: the conviction that she had a duty to those who would outlive her provided her entire career with its cornerstone. As a Christian, though, she also believed something much more. A *saeculum*, to the Romans, had been the limit of living recollection: a brief, fleeting span of time. A baby, perhaps, can be dandled by its great-grandparent; but ashes must ultimately return to ashes, and dust to dust. Without a dimension of the celestial, all things are transitory. So my godmother knew. But she did not believe that all things are transitory. She had the hope of eternal life. It was a faith that she had received from her mother, who had received it in turn from her parents, who had received it in turn from their parents. Down the generations, down the centuries, down the millennia it had been passed. Only Jews could lay claim to anything comparable: a living tradition that could be traced back along an unbroken line to the long-vanished civilisation of the Roman Empire. And this was the tradition that my godmother passed to me.

But that was not all she passed to me. As a young child, I only had one true obsession – and it was not Bible stories. My godmother, because she was a kind and loving woman, with a teacher's long experience of small boys and their obsessions, was not remotely disappointed that all I really cared about was prehistoric animals. Her house, on the outskirts of a small town in southern England, was conveniently located for exploring the cliffs where, in 1811, the first complete skull of an ichthyosaur had been found. Sitting in the back of the car as my mother drove me there, I would gaze out

at the countryside, and dream of the Mesozoic. I was not the first to do so. On the wall of a local fossil shop, hung above the ammonites and crinoids and ichthyosaur teeth, there was a reproduction of the first-ever illustration of a prehistoric landscape. Painted in 1830, it showed what the neighbourhood might have looked like in the Jurassic. Palm trees sprouted from otherwise bare lumps of rock. Strange creatures, half-dragon, half-bat, soared over a teeming sea. A long-necked monster, attacked by an ichthyosaur, voided its bowels. It was all very sinister. It was all very thrilling.

God, speaking to Job from the whirlwind, had told him of drawing Leviathan with a hook, and with a cord pressing down his tongue. But I found it hard to square this with what I knew of ichthyosaurs. Slowly, like a dimmer switch being turned down, I found my belief in God fading. The reaches of time seemed too icily immense for the life and death of a single human being two thousand years ago possibly to have had the cosmic significance claimed for it by Christianity. Why should *Homo sapiens* be granted a status denied ammonites? Why, if God existed, had he allowed so many species to evolve, to flourish, and then utterly to disappear? Why, if he were merciful and good, had he permitted an asteroid to smash into the side of the planet, making the flesh on the bones of dinosaurs burst into flame, the Mesozoic seas to boil, and darkness to cover the face of the earth? I did not spend my whole time worrying about these questions; but sometimes, in the dead of night, I would. The hope offered by the Christian story, that there was an order and a purpose to humanity's existence, felt like something that had forever slipped my grasp. 'The more the universe seems comprehensible,' as the physicist Steven Weinberg famously put it, 'the more it also seems pointless.'²⁴

When, in the spring of 2009, I was told that my godmother had been taken to hospital, I went to visit her. She was clearly dying. Because of a stroke, she did not speak as fluently as she had once done; but she managed to assure me of her certainty that all would be well, and all would be well, and all manner of thing would be well. When I rose and left her, I paused in the doorway, and looked back. She had turned to face the wall. She lay

hunched like an injured animal. I did not think I would see her again. Nor did I think, as she hoped, that we would meet in heaven. Only the atoms and the energy that had constituted her living self, and which had originated with the universe itself, would endure. Every wave of every particle that was my beloved godmother would remain, as those of every other organism that had ever existed – humans, dinosaurs, microbes – would remain; and perhaps in this there was a source of comfort. But not really. It seemed to me, driving away from the hospital, just a palliative. A story told by a species that, as I knew from my own personal experience, cannot bear very much reality.

‘There is nothing particular about man. He is but a part of this world.’²⁵ Today, in the West, there are many who would agree with Himmler that, for humanity to claim a special status for itself, to imagine itself as somehow superior to the rest of creation, is an unwarrantable conceit. *Homo sapiens* is just another species. To insist otherwise is to cling to the shattered fragments of religious belief. Yet the implications of this view – which the Nazis, of course, claimed as their sanction for genocide – remain unsettling for many. Just as Nietzsche had foretold, free-thinkers who mock the very idea of a god as a dead thing, a sky fairy, an imaginary friend, still piously hold to taboos and morals that derive from Christianity. In 2002, in Amsterdam, the World Humanist Congress affirmed ‘the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others’.²⁶ Yet this – despite humanists’ stated ambition to provide ‘an alternative to dogmatic religion’²⁷ – was nothing if not itself a statement of belief. Himmler, at any rate, had understood what licence was opened up by the abandonment of Christianity. The humanist assumption that atheism and liberalism go together was just that: an assumption. Without the biblical story that God had created humanity in his own image to draw upon, the reverence of humanists for their own species risked seeming mawkish and shallow. What basis – other than mere sentimentality – was there to argue for it? Perhaps, as the humanist manifesto declared, through ‘the application of the methods of science’.²⁸ Yet this was barely any less of a myth than Genesis. As in the

days of Darwin and Huxley, so in the twenty-first century, the ambition of agnostics to translate values ‘into facts that can be scientifically understood’²⁹ was a fantasy. It derived not from the viability of such a project, but from medieval theology. It was not truth that science offered moralists, but a mirror. Racists identified it with racist values; liberals with liberal values. The primary dogma of humanism – ‘that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others’³⁰ – found no more corroboration in science than did the dogma of the Nazis that anyone not fit for life should be exterminated. The wellspring of humanist values lay not in reason, not in evidence-based thinking, but in history.

It was always my profoundest regret, as a child, that dinosaurs no longer existed. I only had to look at a cow to wish it were a Triceratops. Yet now, in middle age, I discover that dinosaurs do still exist. Huxley’s thesis, that birds had originated from something akin to small, carnivorous dinosaurs, has been spectacularly substantiated. Today, after a century and more of being scorned by palaeontologists, proof for it has been coming thick and fast. It is now clear that feathers may be at least as old as dinosaurs themselves. Tyrannosaurs had wishbones; laid eggs; had filamentous coats of fuzz. When, in an astonishing breakthrough, collagen was extracted recently from the remains of one tyrannosaur fossil, its amino acid sequences turned out to bear an unmistakable resemblance to those of a chicken. The more the evidence is studied, the hazier the dividing line between birds and dinosaurs has become. The same, *mutatis mutandis*, might be said of the dividing line between agnostics and Christians. On 16 July 2018, one of the world’s best-known scientists, a man as celebrated for his polemics against religion as for his writings on evolutionary biology, sat listening to the bells of an English cathedral. ‘So much nicer than the aggressive-sounding “Allahu Akhbar”,’ Richard Dawkins tweeted. ‘Or is that just my cultural upbringing?’³¹ The question was a perfectly appropriate one for an admirer of Darwin to ponder. It is no surprise, since humans, just like any other biological organism, are products of evolution, that its workings should be evident in their assumptions, beliefs and

cultures. A preference for church bells over the sound of Muslims praising God does not just emerge by magic. Dawkins – agnostic, secularist and humanist that he is – absolutely has the instincts of someone brought up in a Christian civilisation.

Today, as the flood-tide of Western power and influence ebbs, the illusions of European and American liberals risk being left stranded. Much that they have sought to cast as universal stands exposed as never having been anything of the kind. Agnosticism – as Huxley, the man who coined the word, readily acknowledged – ranks as ‘that conviction of the supremacy of private judgment (indeed, of the impossibility of escaping it) which is the foundation of the Protestant Reformation’.³² Secularism owes its existence to the medieval papacy. Humanism derives ultimately from claims made in the Bible: that humans are made in God’s image; that his Son died equally for everyone; that there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. Repeatedly, like a great earthquake, Christianity has sent reverberations across the world. First there was the primal revolution: the revolution preached by Saint Paul. Then there came the aftershocks: the revolution in the eleventh century that set Latin Christendom upon its momentous course; the revolution commemorated as the Reformation; the revolution that killed God. All bore an identical stamp: the aspiration to enfold within their embrace every other possible way of seeing the world; the claim to a universalism that was culturally highly specific. That human beings have rights; that they are born equal; that they are owed sustenance, and shelter, and refuge from persecution: these were never self-evident truths.

The Nazis, certainly, knew as much – which is why, in today’s demonology, they retain their starring role. Communist dictators may have been no less murderous than fascist ones; but they – because communism was the expression of a concern for the oppressed masses – rarely seem as diabolical to people today. The measure of how Christian we as a society remain is that mass murder precipitated by racism tends to be seen as vastly more abhorrent than mass murder precipitated by an ambition to usher in a classless paradise. Liberals may not believe in hell; but they still believe in

evil. The fear of it puts them in its shade no less than it ever did Gregory the Great. Just as he lived in dread of Satan, so do we of Hitler's ghost. Behind the readiness to use 'fascist' as an insult there lurks a numbing fear: of what might happen should it cease to be taken as an insult. If secular humanism derives not from reason or from science, but from the distinctive course of Christianity's evolution – a course that, in the opinion of growing numbers in Europe and America, has left God dead – then how are its values anything more than the shadow of a corpse? What are the foundations of its morality, if not a myth?

A myth, though, is not a lie. At its most profound – as Tolkien, that devout Catholic, always argued – a myth can be true. To be a Christian is to believe that God became man, and suffered a death as terrible as any mortal has ever suffered. This is why the cross, that ancient implement of torture, remains what it has always been: the fitting symbol of the Christian revolution. It is the audacity of it – the audacity of finding in a twisted and defeated corpse the glory of the creator of the universe – that serves to explain, more surely than anything else, the sheer strangeness of Christianity, and of the civilisation to which it gave birth. Today, the power of this strangeness remains as alive as it has ever been. It is manifest in the great surge of conversions that has swept Africa and Asia over the past century; in the conviction of millions upon millions that the breath of the Spirit, like a living fire, still blows upon the world; and, in Europe and North America, in the assumptions of many more millions who would never think to describe themselves as Christian. All are heirs to the same revolution: a revolution that has, at its molten heart, the image of a god dead on a cross.

No doubt I should have appreciated this earlier. As it was, only during the early stages of writing this book, when I travelled to Iraq to make a film, did it properly dawn on me. Sinjar was a town that, when I visited it, stood directly on the frontier with the Islamic State. It had been seized from their fighters just a few weeks before. Back in 2014, when they captured and occupied Sinjar, it had been home to large numbers of Yazidis, a religious minority condemned by the Islamic State as devil-worshippers. Their fate

had been grim precisely as the fate of those who resisted the Romans had been grim. Men had been crucified; women had been enslaved. To stand amid the ruins of Sinjar, knowing that two miles away, across flat and open ground, were ranged the very people who had committed such atrocities, was to appreciate how, in antiquity, the stench of heat and corpses would have served a conqueror as the marker of his possession. Crucifixion was not merely a punishment. It was a means to achieving dominance: a dominance felt as a dread in the guts of the subdued. Terror of power was the index of power. That was how it had always been, and always would be. It was the way of the world.

For two thousand years, though, Christians have disputed this. Many of them, over the course of this time, have themselves become agents of terror. They have put the weak in their shadow; they have brought suffering, and persecution, and slavery in their wake. Yet the standards by which they stand condemned for this are themselves Christian; nor, even if churches across the West continue to empty, does it seem likely that these standards will quickly change. ‘God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.’³³ This is the myth that we in the West still persist in clinging to. Christendom, in that sense, remains Christendom still.

XXI Woke

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- 16 Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 1.1.2.
- 17 Sade. *Juliette*, p. 172.
- 18 Milton Himmelfarb. His reflection was prompted by a viewing of the Beatles' film, *Yellow Submarine*. Quoted by John Carlevale in 'Dionysus Now: Dionysian Myth-History in the Sixties' (*Arion* 13, 2005), p. 95.
- 19 Ralph Gleason. Quoted by Ibid., p. 89.
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- 24 Steven Weinberg. *The First Three Minutes* (New York, 1977), p. 154.
- 25 Heinrich Himmler. Quoted by Chapoutot, p. 27.
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- 30 Amsterdam Declaration, 2002.
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33 1 Corinthians. 1.27.