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THE 'GOOD' BOOK  
AND THE CHANGING  
MORAL ZEITGEIST

*Politics has slain its thousands, but religion  
has slain its tens of thousands.*

— SEAN O'CASEY

There are two ways in which scripture might be a source of morals or rules for living. One is by direct instruction, for example through the Ten Commandments, which are the subject of such bitter contention in the culture wars of America's boondocks. The other is by example: God, or some other biblical character, might serve as – to use the contemporary jargon – a role model. Both scriptural routes, if followed through religiously (the adverb is used in its metaphoric sense but with an eye to its origin), encourage a system of morals which any civilized modern person, whether religious or not, would find – I can put it no more gently – obnoxious.

To be fair, much of the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries.<sup>90</sup> This may explain some of the sheer strangeness of the Bible. But unfortunately it is this same weird volume that religious zealots hold up to us as the inerrant source of our morals and rules for living. Those who wish to base their morality literally on the Bible have either not read it or not understood it, as Bishop John Shelby Spong, in *The Sins of Scripture*, rightly observed. Bishop Spong, by the way, is a nice example of a liberal bishop whose beliefs are so advanced as to be almost unrecognizable to the majority of those who call themselves Christians. A British counterpart is Richard Holloway, recently retired as Bishop of Edinburgh. Bishop Holloway even describes himself as a 'recovering Christian'. I had a public discussion with him in Edinburgh, which was one of the most stimulating and interesting encounters I have had.<sup>91</sup>

## THE OLD TESTAMENT

Begin in Genesis with the well-loved story of Noah, derived from the Babylonian myth of Uta-Napisthim and known from the older mythologies of several cultures. The legend of the animals going into the ark two by two is charming, but the moral of the story of

Noah is appalling. God took a dim view of humans, so he (with the exception of one family) drowned the lot of them including children and also, for good measure, the rest of the (presumably blameless) animals as well.

*with picking the scripture*  
Of course, irritated theologians will protest that we don't take the book of Genesis literally any more. But that is my whole point! We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols or allegories. Such picking and choosing is a matter of personal decision, just as much, or as little, as the atheist's decision to follow this moral precept or that was a personal decision, without an absolute foundation. If one of these is 'morality flying by the seat of its pants', so is the other.

In any case, despite the good intentions of the sophisticated theologian, a frighteningly large number of people still do take their scriptures, including the story of Noah, literally. According to Gallup, they include approximately 50 per cent of the US electorate. Also, no doubt, many of those Asian holy men who blamed the 2004 tsunami not on a plate tectonic shift but on human sins,<sup>92</sup> ranging from drinking and dancing in bars to breaking some footling sabbath rule. Steeped in the story of Noah, and ignorant of all except biblical learning, who can blame them? Their whole education has led them to view natural disasters as bound up with human affairs, paybacks for human misdemeanours rather than anything so impersonal as plate tectonics. By the way, what presumptuous egocentricity to believe that earth-shaking events, on the scale at which a god (or a tectonic plate) might operate, must always have a human connection. Why should a divine being, with creation and eternity on his mind, care a fig for petty human malefactions? We humans give ourselves such airs, even aggrandizing our poky little 'sins' to the level of cosmic significance!

When I interviewed for television the Reverend Michael Bray, a prominent American anti-abortion activist, I asked him why evangelical Christians were so obsessed with private sexual inclinations such as homosexuality, which didn't interfere with anybody else's life. His reply invoked something like self-defence. Innocent citizens are at risk of becoming collateral damage when God chooses to strike a town with a natural disaster because it houses sinners. In 2005, the fine city of New Orleans was catastrophically

flooded in the aftermath of a hurricane, Katrina. The Reverend Pat Robertson, one of America's best-known televangelists and a former presidential candidate, was reported as blaming the hurricane on a lesbian comedian who happened to live in New Orleans.\* You'd think an omnipotent God would adopt a slightly more targeted approach to zapping sinners: a judicious heart attack, perhaps, rather than the wholesale destruction of an entire city just because it happened to be the domicile of one lesbian comedian.

In November 2005, the citizens of Dover, Pennsylvania, voted off their local school board the entire slate of fundamentalists who had brought the town notoriety, not to say ridicule, by attempting to enforce the teaching of 'intelligent design'. When Pat Robertson heard that the fundamentalists had been democratically defeated at the ballot, he offered a stern warning to Dover:

I'd like to say to the good citizens of Dover, if there is a disaster in your area, don't turn to God. You just rejected him from your city, and don't wonder why he hasn't helped you when problems begin, if they begin, and I'm not saying they will. But if they do, just remember you just voted God out of your city. And if that's the case, then don't ask for his help, because he might not be there.<sup>93</sup>

Pat Robertson would be harmless comedy, were he less typical of those who today hold power and influence in the United States.

In the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Noah equivalent, chosen to be spared with his family because he was uniquely righteous, was Abraham's nephew Lot. Two male angels were sent to Sodom to warn Lot to leave the city before the brimstone arrived. Lot hospitably welcomed the angels into his house, whereupon all the men of Sodom gathered around and demanded that Lot should hand the angels over so that they could (what else?)

\* It is unclear whether the story, which originated at <http://datelinehollywood.com/archives/2005/09/05/robertson-blames-hurricane-on-choice-of-ellen-deneres-to-host-emmys/> is true. Whether true or not, it is widely believed, no doubt because it is entirely typical of utterances by evangelical clergy, including Robertson, on disasters such as Katrina. See, for example, [www.emediawire.com/releases/2005/9/emw281940.htm](http://www.emediawire.com/releases/2005/9/emw281940.htm). The website that says the Katrina story is untrue ([www.snopes.com/katrina/satire/robertson.asp](http://www.snopes.com/katrina/satire/robertson.asp)) also quotes Robertson as saying, of an earlier Gay Pride march in Orlando, Florida, 'I would warn Orlando that you're right in the way of some serious hurricanes, and I don't think I'd be waving those flags in God's face if I were you.'

sodomize them: 'Where are the men which came in to thee this night? Bring them out unto us, that we may know them' (Genesis 19: 5). Yes, 'know' has the Authorized Version's usual euphemistic meaning, which is very funny in the context. Lot's gallantry in refusing the demand suggests that God might have been onto something when he singled him out as the only good man in Sodom. But Lot's halo is tarnished by the terms of his refusal: 'I pray you, brethren, do not so wickedly. Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes: only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof' (Genesis 19: 7-8).

Whatever else this strange story might mean, it surely tells us something about the respect accorded to women in this intensely religious culture. As it happened, Lot's bargaining away of his daughters' virginity proved unnecessary, for the angels succeeded in repelling the marauders by miraculously striking them blind. They then warned Lot to decamp immediately with his family and his animals, because the city was about to be destroyed. The whole household escaped, with the exception of Lot's unfortunate wife, whom the Lord turned into a pillar of salt because she committed the offence – comparatively mild, one might have thought – of looking over her shoulder at the fireworks display.

Lot's two daughters make a brief reappearance in the story. After their mother was turned into a pillar of salt, they lived with their father in a cave up a mountain. Starved of male company, they decided to make their father drunk and copulate with him. Lot was beyond noticing when his elder daughter arrived in his bed or when she left, but he was not too drunk to impregnate her. The next night the two daughters agreed it was the younger one's turn. Again Lot was too drunk to notice, and he impregnated her too (Genesis 19: 31-6). If this dysfunctional family was the best Sodom had to offer by way of morals, some might begin to feel a certain sympathy with God and his judicial brimstone.

The story of Lot and the Sodomites is eerily echoed in chapter 19 of the book of Judges, where an unnamed Levite (priest) was travelling with his concubine in Gibeah. They spent the night in the house of a hospitable old man. While they were eating their supper,

the men of the city came and beat on the door, demanding that the old man should hand over his male guest 'so that we may know him'. In almost exactly the same words as Lot, the old man said: 'Nay, my brethren, nay, I pray you, do not so wickedly; seeing that this man is come into mine house do not this folly. Behold, here is my daughter a maiden, and his concubine; them I will bring out now, and humble ye them, and do with them what seemeth good unto you; but unto this man do not so vile a thing' (Judges 19: 23-4). Again, the misogynistic ethos comes through, loud and clear. I find the phrase 'humble ye them' particularly chilling. Enjoy yourselves by humiliating and raping my daughter and this priest's concubine, but show a proper respect for my guest who is, after all, male. In spite of the similarity between the two stories, the *dénouement* was less happy for the Levite's concubine than for Lot's daughters.

The Levite handed her over to the mob, who gang-raped her all night: 'They knew her and abused her all the night until the morning: and when the day began to spring, they let her go. Then came the woman in the dawning of the day, and fell down at the door of the man's house where her lord was, till it was light' (Judges 19: 25-6). In the morning, the Levite found his concubine lying prostrate on the doorstep and said – with what we today might see as callous abruptness – 'Up, and let us be going.' But she didn't move. She was dead. So he 'took a knife, and laid hold on his concubine, and divided her, together with her bones, into twelve pieces, and sent her into all the coasts of Israel'. Yes, you read correctly. Look it up in Judges 19: 29. Let's charitably put it down again to the ubiquitous weirdness of the Bible. This story is so similar to that of Lot, one can't help wondering whether a fragment of manuscript became accidentally misplaced in some long-forgotten scriptorium: an illustration of the erratic provenance of sacred texts.

Lot's uncle Abraham was the founding father of all three 'great' monotheistic religions. His patriarchal status renders him only somewhat less likely than God to be taken as a role model. But what modern moralist would wish to follow him? Relatively early in his long life, Abraham went to Egypt to tough out a famine with his wife Sarah. He realized that such a beautiful woman would be desirable to the Egyptians and that therefore his own life, as her husband, might be endangered. So he decided to pass her off as his

sister. In this capacity she was taken into Pharaoh's harem, and Abraham consequently became rich in Pharaoh's favour. God disapproved of this cosy arrangement, and sent plagues on Pharaoh and his house (why not on Abraham?). An understandably aggrieved Pharaoh demanded to know why Abraham had not told him Sarah was his wife. He then handed her back to Abraham and kicked them both out of Egypt (Genesis 12: 18–19). Weirdly, it seems that the couple later tried to pull the same stunt again, this time with Abimelech the King of Gerar. He too was induced by Abraham to marry Sarah, again having been led to believe she was Abraham's sister, not his wife (Genesis 20: 2–5). He too expressed his indignation, in almost identical terms to Pharaoh's, and one can't help sympathizing with both of them. Is the similarity another indicator of textual unreliability?

Such unpleasant episodes in Abraham's story are mere peccadilloes compared with the infamous tale of the sacrificing of his son Isaac (Muslim scripture tells the same story about Abraham's other son, Ishmael). God ordered Abraham to make a burnt offering of his longed-for son. Abraham built an altar, put firewood upon it, and trussed Isaac up on top of the wood. His murdering knife was already in his hand when an angel dramatically intervened with the news of a last-minute change of plan: God was only joking after all, 'tempting' Abraham, and testing his faith. A modern moralist cannot help but wonder how a child could ever recover from such psychological trauma. By the standards of modern morality, this disgraceful story is an example simultaneously of child abuse, bullying in two asymmetrical power relationships, and the first recorded use of the Nuremberg defence: 'I was only obeying orders.' Yet the legend is one of the great foundational myths of all three monotheistic religions.

Once again, modern theologians will protest that the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac should not be taken as literal fact. And, once again, the appropriate response is twofold. First, many many people, even to this day, do take the whole of their scripture to be literal fact, and they have a great deal of political power over the rest of us, especially in the United States and in the Islamic world. Second, if not as literal fact, how should we take the story? As an allegory? Then an allegory for what? Surely nothing praiseworthy.

As a moral lesson? But what kind of morals could one derive from this appalling story? Remember, all I am trying to establish for the moment is that we do not, as a matter of fact, derive our morals from scripture. Or, if we do, we pick and choose among the scriptures for the nice bits and reject the nasty. But then we must have some independent criterion for deciding which are the moral bits: a criterion which, wherever it comes from, cannot come from scripture itself and is presumably available to all of us whether we are religious or not.

Apologists even seek to salvage some decency for the God character in this deplorable tale. Wasn't it good of God to spare Isaac's life at the last minute? In the unlikely event that any of my readers are persuaded by this obscene piece of special pleading, I refer them to another story of human sacrifice, which ended more unhappily. In Judges, chapter 11, the military leader Jephthah made a bargain with God that, if God would guarantee Jephthah's victory over the Ammonites, Jephthah would, without fail, sacrifice as a burnt offering 'whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return'. Jephthah did indeed defeat the Ammonites ('with a very great slaughter', as is par for the course in the book of Judges) and he returned home victorious. Not surprisingly, his daughter, his only child, came out of the house to greet him (with timbrels and dances) and – alas – she was the first living thing to do so. Understandably Jephthah rent his clothes, but there was nothing he could do about it. God was obviously looking forward to the promised burnt offering, and in the circumstances the daughter very decently agreed to be sacrificed. She asked only that she should be allowed to go into the mountains for two months to bewail her virginity. At the end of this time she meekly returned, and Jephthah cooked her. God did not see fit to intervene on this occasion.

God's monumental rage whenever his chosen people flirted with a rival god resembles nothing so much as sexual jealousy of the worst kind, and again it should strike a modern moralist as far from good role-model material. The temptation to sexual infidelity is readily understandable even to those who do not succumb, and it is a staple of fiction and drama, from Shakespeare to bedroom farce. But the apparently irresistible temptation to whore with foreign gods is something we moderns find harder to empathize

Handwritten note:  
Sacrificing  
Isaac  
of the  
sacrifice of  
Jephthah

with. To my naïve eyes, 'Thou shalt have no other gods but me' would seem an easy enough commandment to keep: a doddle, one might think, compared with 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife'. Or her ass. (Or her ox.) Yet throughout the Old Testament, with the same predictable regularity as in bedroom farce, God had only to turn his back for a moment and the Children of Israel would be off and at it with Baal, or some trollop of a graven image.\* Or, on one calamitous occasion, a golden calf . . .

Moses, even more than Abraham, is a likely role model for followers of all three monotheistic religions. Abraham may be the original patriarch, but if anybody should be called the doctrinal founder of Judaism and its derivative religions, it is Moses. On the occasion of the golden calf episode, Moses was safely out of the way up Mount Sinai, communing with God and getting tablets of stone graven by him. The people down below (who were on pain of death to refrain from so much as *touching* the mountain) didn't waste any time:

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down out of the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him, Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him. (Exodus 32: 1)

Aaron got everybody to pool their gold, melted it down and made a golden calf, for which newly invented deity he then built an altar so they could all start sacrificing to it.

Well, they should have known better than to fool around behind God's back like that. He might be up a mountain but he was, after all, omniscient and he lost no time in despatching Moses as his enforcer. Moses raced hotfoot down the mountain, carrying the stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments. When he arrived and saw the golden calf he was so furious that he dropped the tablets and broke them (God later gave him a replacement set, so that was all right). Moses seized the golden calf, burned it, ground it to powder, mixed it with water and made the

\* This richly comic idea was suggested to me by Jonathan Miller who, surprisingly, never included it in a *Beyond the Fringe* sketch. I also thank him for recommending the scholarly book upon which it is based: Halbertal and Margalit (1992).

people swallow it. Then he told everybody in the priestly tribe of Levi to pick up a sword and kill as many people as possible. This amounted to about three thousand which, one might have hoped, would have been enough to assuage God's jealous sulk. But no, God wasn't finished yet. In the last verse of this terrible chapter his parting shot was to send a plague upon what was left of the people 'because they made the calf, which Aaron made'.

The book of Numbers tells how God incited Moses to attack the Midianites. His army made short work of slaying all the men, and they burned all the Midianite cities, but they didn't kill the women and children. This merciful restraint by his soldiers infuriated Moses, and he gave orders that all the boy children should be killed, and all the women who were not virgins. 'But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves' (Numbers 31: 18). No, Moses was not a great role model for modern moralists.

In so far as modern religious writers attach any kind of symbolic or allegorical meaning to the massacre of the Midianites, the symbolism is aimed in precisely the wrong direction. The unfortunate Midianites, so far as one can tell from the biblical account, were the victims of genocide in their own country. Yet their name lives on in Christian lore only in that favourite hymn (which I can still sing from memory after fifty years, to two different tunes, both in grim minor keys):

Christian, dost thou see them  
On the holy ground?  
How the troops of Midian  
Prowl and prowl around?  
Christian, up and smite them,  
Counting gain but loss;  
Smite them by the merit  
Of the holy cross.

Alas, poor slandered, slaughtered Midianites, to be remembered only as poetic symbols of universal evil in a Victorian hymn.

The rival god Baal seems to have been a perennially seductive tempter to wayward worship. In Numbers, chapter 25, many of the

Israelites were lured by Moabite women to sacrifice to Baal. God reacted with characteristic fury. He ordered Moses to 'Take all the heads of the people and hang them up before the Lord against the sun, that the fierce anger of the Lord may be turned away from Israel.' One cannot help, yet again, marvelling at the extraordinarily draconian view taken of the sin of flirting with rival gods. To our modern sense of values and justice it seems a trifling sin compared to, say, offering your daughter for a gang rape. It is yet another example of the disconnect between scriptural and modern (one is tempted to say civilized) morals. Of course, it is easily enough understood in terms of the theory of memes, and the qualities that a deity needs in order to survive in the meme pool.

The tragi-farce of God's maniacal jealousy against alternative gods recurs continually throughout the Old Testament. It motivates the first of the Ten Commandments (the ones on the tablets that Moses broke: Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 5), and it is even more prominent in the (otherwise rather different) substitute commandments that God provided to replace the broken tablets (Exodus 34). Having promised to drive out of their homelands the unfortunate Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, God gets down to what really matters: rival *gods!*

... ye shall destroy their altars, break their images, and cut down their groves. For thou shalt worship no other god: for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. Lest thou make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they go a whoring after their gods, and do sacrifice unto their gods, and one call thee, and thou eat of his sacrifice; And thou take of their daughters unto thy sons, and their daughters go a whoring after their gods, and make thy sons go a whoring after their gods. Thou shalt make thee no molten gods (Exodus 34: 13-17)

I know, yes, of course, of course, times have changed, and no religious leader today (apart from the likes of the Taliban or the American Christian equivalent) thinks like Moses. But that is my whole point. All I am establishing is that modern morality, wherever else it comes from, does not come from the Bible. Apologists

cannot get away with claiming that religion provides them with some sort of inside track to defining what is good and what is bad – a privileged source unavailable to atheists. They cannot get away with it, not even if they employ that favourite trick of interpreting selected scriptures as 'symbolic' rather than literal. By what criterion do you *decide* which passages are symbolic, which literal?

The ethnic cleansing begun in the time of Moses is brought to bloody fruition in the book of Joshua, a text remarkable for the bloodthirsty massacres it records and the xenophobic relish with which it does so. As the charming old song exultantly has it, 'Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and the walls came a-tumbling down ... There's none like good old Joshuay, at the battle of Jericho.' Good old Joshua didn't rest until 'they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword' (Joshua 6: 21).

Yet again, theologians will protest, it didn't happen. Well, no – the story has it that the walls came tumbling down at the mere sound of men shouting and blowing horns, so indeed it didn't happen – but that is not the point. The point is that, whether true or not, the Bible is held up to us as the source of our morality. And the Bible story of Joshua's destruction of Jericho, and the invasion of the Promised Land in general, is morally indistinguishable from Hitler's invasion of Poland, or Saddam Hussein's massacres of the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs. The Bible may be an arresting and poetic work of fiction, but it is not the sort of book you should give your children to form their morals. As it happens, the story of Joshua in Jericho is the subject of an interesting experiment in child morality, to be discussed later in this chapter.

Do not think, by the way, that the God character in the story nursed any doubts or scruples about the massacres and genocides that accompanied the seizing of the Promised Land. On the contrary, his orders, for example in Deuteronomy 20, were ruthlessly explicit. He made a clear distinction between the people who lived in the land that was needed, and those who lived a long way away. The latter should be invited to surrender peacefully. If they refused, all the men were to be killed and the women carried off for breeding. In contrast to this relatively humane treatment, see what was in store for those tribes unfortunate enough to be already in

residence in the promised *Lebensraum*: 'But of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: But thou shalt utterly destroy them; namely, the Hittites, and the Amorites, the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee.'

Do those people who hold up the Bible as an inspiration to moral rectitude have the slightest notion of what is actually written in it? The following offences merit the death penalty, according to Leviticus 20: cursing your parents; committing adultery; making love to your stepmother or your daughter-in-law; homosexuality; marrying a woman and her daughter; bestiality (and, to add injury to insult, the unfortunate beast is to be killed too). You also get executed, of course, for working on the sabbath: the point is made again and again throughout the Old Testament. In Numbers 15, the children of Israel found a man in the wilderness gathering sticks on the forbidden day. They arrested him and then asked God what to do with him. As it turned out, God was in no mood for half-measures that day. 'And the Lord said unto Moses, The man shall surely be put to death: all the congregation shall stone him with stones without the camp. And all the congregation brought him without the camp, and stoned him with stones, and he died.' Did this harmless gatherer of firewood have a wife and children to grieve for him? Did he whimper with fear as the first stones flew, and scream with pain as the fusillade crashed into his head? What shocks me today about such stories is not that they really happened. They probably didn't. What makes my jaw drop is that people today should base their lives on such an appalling role model as Yahweh – and, even worse, that they should bossily try to force the same evil monster (whether fact or fiction) on the rest of us.

The political power of America's Ten Commandment tablet-toters is especially regrettable in that great republic whose constitution, after all, was drawn up by men of the Enlightenment in explicitly secular terms. If we took the Ten Commandments seriously, we would rank the worship of the wrong gods, and the making of graven images, as first and second among sins. Rather than condemn the unspeakable vandalism of the Taliban, who

dynamited the 150-foot-high Bamiyan Buddhas in the mountains of Afghanistan, we would praise them for their righteous piety. What we think of as their vandalism was certainly motivated by sincere religious zeal. This is vividly attested by a truly bizarre story, which was the lead in the (London) *Independent* of 6 August 2005. Under the front-page headline, 'The destruction of Mecca', the *Independent* reported:

Historic Mecca, the cradle of Islam, is being buried in an unprecedented onslaught by religious zealots. Almost all of the rich and multi-layered history of the holy city is gone . . . Now the actual birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad is facing the bulldozers, with the connivance of Saudi religious authorities whose hardline interpretation of Islam is compelling them to wipe out their own heritage . . . The motive behind the destruction is the Wahhabists' fanatical fear that places of historical and religious interest could give rise to idolatry or polytheism, the worship of multiple and potentially equal gods. The practice of idolatry in Saudi Arabia remains, in principle, punishable by beheading.

I do not believe there is an atheist in the world who would bulldoze Mecca – or Chartres, York Minster or Notre Dame, the Shwe Dagon, the temples of Kyoto or, of course, the Buddhas of Bamiyan. As the Nobel Prize-winning American physicist Steven Weinberg said, 'Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it, you'd have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, it takes religion.' Blaise Pascal (he of the wager) said something similar: 'Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.'

My main purpose here has not been to show that we *shouldn't* get our morals from scripture (although that is my opinion). My purpose has been to demonstrate that we (and that includes most religious people) as a matter of fact *don't* get our morals from scripture. If we did, we would strictly observe the sabbath and think it just and proper to execute anybody who chose not to. We

would stone to death any new bride who couldn't prove she was a virgin, if her husband pronounced himself unsatisfied with her. We would execute disobedient children. We would ... but wait. Perhaps I have been unfair. Nice Christians will have been protesting throughout this section: everyone knows the Old Testament is pretty unpleasant. The New Testament of Jesus undoes the damage and makes it all right. Doesn't it?

### IS THE NEW TESTAMENT ANY BETTER?

Well, there's no denying that, from a moral point of view, Jesus is a huge improvement over the cruel ogre of the Old Testament. Indeed Jesus, if he existed (or whoever wrote his script if he didn't) was surely one of the great ethical innovators of history. The Sermon on the Mount is way ahead of its time. His 'turn the other cheek' anticipated Gandhi and Martin Luther King by two thousand years. It was not for nothing that I wrote an article called 'Atheists for Jesus' (and was later delighted to be presented with a T-shirt bearing the legend).<sup>94</sup>

But the moral superiority of Jesus precisely bears out my point. Jesus was not content to derive his ethics from the scriptures of his upbringing. He explicitly departed from them, for example when he deflated the dire warnings about breaking the sabbath. 'The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath' has been generalized into a wise proverb. Since a principal thesis of this chapter is that we do not, and should not, derive our morals from scripture, Jesus has to be honoured as a model for that very thesis.

Jesus' family values, it has to be admitted, were not such as one might wish to focus on. He was short, to the point of brusqueness, with his own mother, and he encouraged his disciples to abandon their families to follow him. 'If any man come to me and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.' The American comedian Julia Sweeney expressed her bewilderment in her one-woman stage show, *Letting Go of God*:<sup>95</sup> 'Isn't that what cults do? Get you to reject your family in order to inculcate you?'<sup>96</sup>

Notwithstanding his somewhat dodgy family values, Jesus'

ethical teachings were – at least by comparison with the ethical disaster area that is the Old Testament – admirable; but there are other teachings in the New Testament that no good person should support. I refer especially to the central doctrine of Christianity: that of 'atonement' for 'original sin'. This teaching, which lies at the heart of New Testament theology, is almost as morally obnoxious as the story of Abraham setting out to barbecue Isaac, which it resembles – and that is no accident, as Geza Vermes makes clear in *The Changing Faces of Jesus*. Original sin itself comes straight from the Old Testament myth of Adam and Eve. Their sin – eating the fruit of a forbidden tree – seems mild enough to merit a mere reprimand. But the symbolic nature of the fruit (knowledge of good and evil, which in practice turned out to be knowledge that they were naked) was enough to turn their scrumping escapade into the mother and father of all sins.\* They and all their descendants were banished forever from the Garden of Eden, deprived of the gift of eternal life, and condemned to generations of painful labour, in the field and in childbirth respectively.

So far, so vindictive: par for the Old Testament course. New Testament theology adds a new injustice, topped off by a new sado-masochism whose viciousness even the Old Testament barely exceeds. It is, when you think about it, remarkable that a religion should adopt an instrument of torture and execution as its sacred symbol, often worn around the neck. Lenny Bruce rightly quipped that 'If Jesus had been killed twenty years ago, Catholic school children would be wearing little electric chairs around their necks instead of crosses.' But the theology and punishment-theory behind it is even worse. The sin of Adam and Eve is thought to have passed down the male line – transmitted in the semen according to Augustine. What kind of ethical philosophy is it that condemns every child, even before it is born, to inherit the sin of a remote ancestor? Augustine, by the way, who rightly regarded himself as something of a personal authority on sin, was responsible for

\* I am aware that 'scrumping' will not be familiar to American readers. But I enjoy reading unfamiliar American words and looking them up to broaden my vocabulary. I have deliberately used a few other region-specific words for this reason. Scrumping itself is a *mot juste* of unusual economy. It doesn't just mean stealing: it specifically means stealing *apples* and *only* apples. It is hard for a *mot* to get more *juste* than that. Admittedly the Genesis story doesn't specify that the fruit was an apple, but tradition has long held it so.

coining the phrase 'original sin'. Before him it was known as 'ancestral sin'. Augustine's pronouncements and debates epitomize, for me, the unhealthy preoccupation of early Christian theologians with sin. They could have devoted their pages and their sermons to extolling the sky splashed with stars, or mountains and green forests, seas and dawn choruses. These are occasionally mentioned, but the Christian focus is overwhelmingly on sin sin sin sin sin sin sin. What a nasty little preoccupation to have dominating your life. Sam Harris is magnificently scathing in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*: 'Your principal concern appears to be that the Creator of the universe will take offense at something people do while naked. This prudery of yours contributes daily to the surplus of human misery.'

But now, the sado-masochism. God incarnated himself as a man, Jesus, in order that he should be tortured and executed in *atonement* for the hereditary sin of Adam. Ever since Paul expounded this repellent doctrine, Jesus has been worshipped as the *redeemer* of all our sins. Not just the past sin of Adam: *future* sins as well, whether future people decided to commit them or not!

As another aside, it has occurred to various people, including Robert Graves in his epic novel *King Jesus*, that poor Judas Iscariot has received a bad deal from history, given that his 'betrayal' was a necessary part of the cosmic plan. The same could be said of Jesus' alleged murderers. If Jesus wanted to be betrayed and then murdered, in order that he could redeem us all, isn't it rather unfair of those who consider themselves redeemed to take it out on Judas and on Jews down the ages? I have already mentioned the long list of non-canonical gospels. A manuscript purporting to be the lost Gospel of Judas has recently been translated and has received publicity in consequence.<sup>97</sup> The circumstances of its discovery are disputed, but it seems to have turned up in Egypt some time in the 1970s or 60s. It is in Coptic script on sixty-two pages of papyrus, carbon-dated to around AD 300 but probably based on an earlier Greek manuscript. Whoever the author was, the gospel is seen from the point of view of Judas Iscariot and makes the case that Judas betrayed Jesus only because Jesus asked him to play that role. It was all part of the plan to get Jesus crucified so that he could redeem humankind. Obnoxious as that doctrine is, it seems to com-

pound the unpleasantness that Judas has been vilified ever since.

I have described atonement, the central doctrine of Christianity, as vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent. We should also dismiss it as barking mad, but for its ubiquitous familiarity which has dulled our objectivity. If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them, without having himself tortured and executed in payment – thereby, incidentally, condemning remote future generations of Jews to pogroms and persecution as 'Christ-killers': did that hereditary sin pass down in the semen too?

Paul, as the Jewish scholar Geza Vermes makes clear, was steeped in the old Jewish theological principle that without blood there is no atonement.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, in his Epistle to the Hebrews (9: 22) he said as much. Progressive ethicists today find it hard to defend any kind of retributive theory of punishment, let alone the scapegoat theory – executing an innocent to pay for the sins of the guilty. In any case (one can't help wondering), who was God trying to impress? Presumably himself – judge and jury as well as execution victim. To cap it all, Adam, the supposed perpetrator of the original sin, never existed in the first place: an awkward fact – excusably unknown to Paul but presumably known to an omniscient God (and Jesus, if you believe he was God?) – which fundamentally undermines the premise of the whole tortuously nasty theory. Oh, but of course, the story of Adam and Eve was only ever *symbolic*, wasn't it? *Symbolic*? So, in order to impress himself, Jesus had himself tortured and executed, in vicarious punishment for a *symbolic* sin committed by a *non-existent* individual? As I said, barking mad, as well as viciously unpleasant.

Before leaving the Bible, I need to call attention to one particularly unpalatable aspect of its ethical teaching. Christians seldom realize that much of the moral consideration for others which is apparently promoted by both the Old and New Testaments was originally intended to apply only to a narrowly defined in-group. 'Love thy neighbour' didn't mean what we now think it means. It meant only 'Love another Jew.' The point is devastatingly made by the American physician and evolutionary anthropologist John Hartung. He has written a remarkable paper on the evolution and biblical history of in-group morality, laying stress, too, on the flip side – out-group hostility.