THE INQUISITION
BLASPHEMY IS NOT RACISM
THE CHRISTIAN FALLACY
THE BIBLE AND RAPE
DINOSAUR FOLLIES
THE JESUS MYTH
DRUNKS

ADAM GOPNIK
JOYCE ARTHUR
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PAUL McGrane
VALERIE TARICO
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DEAR READER,

The Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition has been mythologized by generations of artists, writers, and film-makers. Catholic apologists, however, have downplayed the church’s role in the centuries-long institution, often blaming the torture and burning of heretics on “secular” officials. The actual number of victims and deaths will probably never be determined. But the sadistic spirit of the Inquisition will undoubtedly last forever.

In the nineteenth century, D.M. Bennett recognized and challenged the inquisitorial inclination in the censorship crusade of Anthony Comstock and his Christian-sponsored New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. The editor of the Truth Seeker condemned Comstock’s grim work in print as “The American Inquisition.” It drove several victims to suicide and probably hastened D.M. Bennett’s death.

Nearly a century and a half after D.M. Bennett’s imprisonment, some inquisition scholars see a similarity in our ubiquitous surveillance society and the “enhanced” interrogation techniques inflicted on alleged enemy combatants at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and secret “black sites” around the world.

In this issue, we revisit the Roman Catholic church’s golden age of atrocity.

Worse than all other mean acts are those performed by hypocrites under the cloak of purity and virtue.

-D.M. Bennett

Macdonald writes: Christianity stands convicted of the most infamous cruelty towards its opponents and its own dissenters, and it is impossible that a religion responsible for such deeds, the inspiring and instigating power which moved human beings to such revolting blood-thirstiness, can be a true system.

The Inquisition is also the subject of The New Yorker magazine contributor Adam Gopnik and West Virginia newspaper editor James A. Haught. British author Paul McGrane introduces us to his new book The Christian Fallacy, which provides a paradigm for the foundation of Christianity and, according to his publisher, presents the “truth” about Jesus “that is stranger than you ever imagined.”

We present an excerpt from our D.M. Bennett biography about the editor’s close friendship with Stephen Pearl Andrews, the prolific anarchist author and speech-writer for the first woman to run for president.

Counterculture icon Paul Krassner satirizes last year’s retrograde Republican presidential candidates’ anti-abortion platform. Canadian pro-choice activist Joyce Arthur defines the difference between blasphemy and racism. Seattle psychologist Valerie Tarico takes on the Bible’s promotion of rape and exposes the Jesus myth with author David Fitzgerald.

In an exclusive excerpt from his latest book Drunks, Chris Finan writes about the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous and acknowledges the significant role played by atheists and agnostics.

– RodeRick Bradford

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Blasphemy is not Racism

One of our key freedoms is the ability to use the tools of reason and science – as well as satire – to question traditional institutions and ideologies, including religion.

Preface: I’m an atheist who firmly believes that religion is false and mostly harmful. I escaped from a Christian fundamentalist childhood, and that was my “oppression.” I spent many subsequent years researching, criticizing, and attacking Christianity, including the Bible, the Jesus story, and various doctrines. Does this mean I’m bigoted against Christians? Of course not. I was one myself. Many of my family members and a few friends are Christians, and I love them. Criticizing ideas is not bigotry.

The following article calls out Islamic terrorism as primarily a product of Islamic religious doctrine. It’s over a year old, but I’ve been too afraid to publish it. My past public comments on this topic have resulted in accusations of bigotry and racism — from my feminist and progressive “allies.” However, recent encouragement to publish this has come from friends, former Muslims I’ve met, and from reading articles by other atheists, and reformist and ex-Muslims. Just today, Armin Navabi, an ex-Muslim and founder of Atheist Republic, gave me further encouragement, and I thank him.

This piece was originally written for my former monthly column at Rabble.ca in Jan 2015, a “progressive” political news site. They rejected it — the only submission from me they ever rejected. (They did eventually publish a different article that mostly avoided mentioning Islamic terrorism.) This draft represents a revised version that tried to answer their objections, which they still rejected. The final paragraph was just added today.
I absorbed a great deal of media commentary on the tragedy, and it became clear that the intent and context of many of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons were lost on people unfamiliar with French politics. The cartoons usually have multiple layers and meanings, combining two or three different issues at once. For example, the magazine frequently skews the racism and xenophobia of France's right-wing party, the National Front, often taking the satire to absurd lengths such as equating the party with Boko Haram.

In fact, Charlie Hebdo is a left-wing, atheist magazine that often satirizes religion through the lens of French politics. It frequently targets Christianity and Judaism too, not just Islam. Its satire of Islam focuses mostly on Mohammed, Islamic clerics, practices such as the Islamic oppression of women, and Islamic terrorists — not Muslims in general.

It seems the critics of Charlie Hebdo were confusing satire of religion with racism. But Islam is not a race — it’s a religion. Muslims are not a race either. They are part of a religious community and belong to every nationality and ethnic group imaginable, including white westerners. If Muslims are associated with Arabs, that’s a western bias (and probably a racist one). The majority of Muslims actually live in South and Southeast Asia, while only 20 per cent live in the Middle East and North Africa. Silencing critiques of Islam with accusations of racism is itself racist, because it holds Muslims to a lower standard than the rest of us — it defines them by their religion as if they can’t help themselves, and it assumes that all Muslims are the same. It fails to acknowledge their diversity and humanity, and it abandons oppressed and persecuted groups within the Muslim world, such as liberals, atheists, gays, and women.

On a feminist listserv, I once critiqued the Muslim burqa (full body cover) and niqab (face cover) as symbols of religious oppression of women and their sexuality. To my astonishment, I was roundly attacked as “racist.” But I have always supported the right of all women to wear whatever they want for whatever reason. Regardless of the various reasons individual women wear these garments today, their origin is patriarchal and their justification comes from Islamic doctrine. The burkas and niqabs were designed to hide women so that men wouldn’t be tempted by their sexuality — especially non-Muslim men or foreign invaders. The intended effect of these garments is not only to invisibilize women, but also to put the onus on women for controlling both their own and men’s sexual behavior, and to send the message that women are valued primarily for their modesty — which means that Islam is defining women by their sexuality from a male perspective. These are factual observations that have nothing to do with judging individual Muslim women for their choices, which are usually not about kowtowing to men.

I see a clear divide between blasphemy and bigotry. Blasphemy is a type of dissent or criticism against a god or religious doctrine, practice, or leader. Bigotry (or hate speech) disparages people based on an immutable or sharable characteristic such as color, race, origin, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, family or marital status, and religion. Yet, it seems that many people don’t understand the difference, so they equate criticism of Islam with bigotry against Muslims and use the term “Islamophobia.” That’s alarming, because it’s quickly starting to resemble the right-wing definition of anti-Semitism — any criticism of Israeli government policies.

Of course, anti-religious satire occurs in a political and cultural context. But the reality today is that Islam has a strong radical minority that is engaged in a belligerent campaign that explicitly uses religious doctrine to justify violence. For example, despite all the western commentary about how the various sins of the French government and society were to blame for the Charlie Hebdo shootings, the only reason that the terrorists themselves gave for killing the cartoonists, as well as Al Qaeda which claimed responsibility, was to “avenge the Prophet.” If the killers were angry at the French government for oppressing Muslims for example, they could have targeted people in the government or even just the innocent public. But they didn’t — they specifically targeted cartoonists who made fun of their religion.

We’re in a clash of ideologies. The liberal western tradition of freedom of speech (however tarnished) is anathema to fundamentalist Islam. To make matters worse, dissent is impossible within an Islamic state, since religion and politics are inextricably wed, and blasphemy and apostasy are punishable by death. Which means the main victims of radical Islam, by far, are other Muslims. A 2013 Pew Forum poll found that most Muslims don’t support terrorism, but that substantial minorities in some countries do support it, while significant numbers — majorities in many countries — believe in the imposition of Sharia law and the death penalty for apostasy.

Christians and Jews have certainly been guilty of terrible atrocities in the name of their faith too. But in the case of Judaism, the worst of it occurred over 2000 years ago (or at least was bragged about in an extensive catalogue — read the Old Testament book of Joshua if you can stomach it), while the Enlightenment put an end to most Christian violence like the Crusades and the Inquisition. Yes, modern Israel is guilty of violence against Palestinians on the basis of religious entitlement, some “pro-life” Christians have been bombing abortion clinics and assassinating doctors for several decades now, and you can find recent examples of Buddhist and Hindu terrorism too. But it’s Islamic fundamentalism that is in global ascendancy right now.

The Institute for European Studies found that “Religion as a driving ideology for terrorism has dramatically increased since 2000.” And almost all of it is perpetrated by Islamic terrorists. In 2013, over 60% of terrorist incidents occurred in just five Muslim countries: Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Syria. Those same countries experienced 82% of global deaths due to terrorism, and four Islamist groups were responsible for 66% of those deaths in 2013: Al Qaeda and its affiliates, Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Islamic State, and the Taliban. Another 21% of global terrorism deaths were caused by an assortment of other mostly Islamic groups. Further, out of nine organizations responsible for the most suicide attacks from 2000 to 2013, eight are Islamic (the ninth was Tamil Tigers) and the worst incidents all took place from 2008 onwards.

Religiously-motivated terrorism is only a subset of all terrorism, and one could argue that the United States and other western powers are guilty of political, state-sponsored terrorism. But there’s a difference in intent, with western countries generally trying to avoid harming civilians, while Islamic terrorists make a point of it. Terrorism experts consider the phenomenon of “global terrorism” to be a recent one associated primarily with Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, whose main goal is existential and religious — to impose Islam on the world through armed conflict. Those adhering to radical Islam take literally the scriptural references that glorify military jihad (as opposed to spiritual jihad). As a result, they commit ex...
not the case for religious extremists. Radical Muslims in citizens in the modern world now opt for. But that's often and hold them. After all, there are many non-violent ways to mobilize terrorist armies without a potent ideology to attract their vision of a global Islam. Most oppressed people do not "martyr" themselves in suicide attacks unless they've been promised 72 virgins in heaven. And it's hard to mobilize terrorist armies without a potent ideology to attract and hold them. After all, there are many non-violent ways to address political grievances that the vast majority of citizens in the modern world now opt for. But that's often not the case for religious extremists. Radical Muslims in particular draw inspiration for violence from belief in literal readings of the Koran and hadith doctrines, as well as religious/political indoctrination by radical Islamists or at Al Qaeda camps such as in Pakistan.

Further, terrorists motivated by religion choose to carry out particularly brutal types of retaliation that arise directly from their fervent religious beliefs. This makes religious terrorists much more dangerous than other types of terrorists, according to terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman:

Religious terrorist violence inevitably assumes a transcendent purpose and therefore becomes a sacramental or divine duty. ... Religion, moreover, functions as a legitimizing force, sanctifying if not encouraging wide scale violence against an almost open-ended category of opponents. Thus religious terrorist violence becomes... a morally justified, divinely instigated expedient toward the attainment of the terrorists’ ultimate ends. This is a direct reflection of the fact that terrorists motivated by a religious imperative do not seek to appeal to any constituency but themselves and the changes they seek... are only to benefit themselves. The religious terrorist moreover sees himself as an outsider from the society that he both abhors and rejects and this sense of alienation enables him to contemplate — and undertake — far more destructive and bloodier types of terrorist operations than his secular counterpart.

Journalist Glenn Greenwald wrote this 2013 piece claiming that Islamic terrorism is motivated by political concerns and not Islam. I spent several hours researching his claims and found that of the seven examples he cites, religious reasons were the primary stated motivation in the first case, and were equal or key underlying motivations in the other six. (I'm happy to share my re-search with anyone interested.)

In any conversation on this topic, one must continually deploy a firewall of caveats and concessions to irrelevancy: Of course, U.S. foreign policy has problems. Yes, we really must get off oil. No, I did not support the war in Iraq. Sure, I've read Chomsky. No doubt, the Bible contains equally terrible passages. Yes, I heard about that abortion clinic bombing in 1984. No, I'm sorry to say that Hitler and Stalin were not motivated by atheism. The Tamil Tigers? Of course, I've heard of them. Now can we honestly talk about the link between belief and behavior?

This is a deeply complex issue with no easy answers. For example, blasphemy and dissent against religion can sometimes be mixed with bigotry against its adherents, and may be hard to pull apart. Some religious believers take slights against their faith very personally, so perhaps one could argue that a devout person’s religious faith is a reflection of their personal identity, and that criticisms of their beliefs cross the line into personal attacks. But that can’t be our legal yardstick. The bad reaction of some religious believers to critiques of what they hold sacred is actually a reflection of their own doubts and insecurities.

We are not obligated to treat Islam with kid gloves to avoid offending Muslims, or out of fear of being labelled “Islamophobic” (which is a false term, akin to being called "anti-Semitic" for criticizing the Israeli government). If we start fearing out of fear of offending or intimidating more terrorists, then we’re allowing fundamentalist religion to destroy our progressive values of free speech and critical inquiry. To be clear, we must respect the right of religious believers to believe whatever they want, but we are under no obligation to respect their actual beliefs, especially when they inspire violent acts among a subset of believers. It should be remembered that Christianity and Islam in particular are proselytizing and conquering religions. Should we support others or impose their religion on whole populations, they have placed their views in a public forum and we have every right — a crucial obligation even — to examine and criti-cize what they believe.

We must defend the right to blasphemy, not criminalize it, or silence ourselves out of fear or misplaced political correctness. Because doing so means excusing terror-ism, and ignoring injustice in Muslim countries. It means abandoning women and oppressed minorities who live there, most of whom can’t speak out for fear of their lives. I’ve personally heard brave people like Armin Navabi, Ali A. Riaz, Maryam Namaz, and Taslima Nasrin — former Muslims who used to live in such countries — ask westerners to please stand up for Muslims and rebut the "re-gressive leftists." That’s a term coined by liberal Muslim Maajid Nawaz for people on the left who refuse to call out Islam even though it’s a primary motive for terrorism and oppression, mostly against people in Muslim countries. So I’m speaking up now. Because it’s not my comfortable life at stake, it’s theirs. [13]

Reprinted with permission from the author, Joyce Arthur is the founder and Executive Director of Canada’s national pro-choice group, the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada (ARCC). Before founding ARCC in 2005, she ran the Pro-Choice Action Network in British Columbia for 10 years and edited the national newsletter Pro-Choice Press, which she began in 1995. Arthur has written hundreds of articles on abortion and other political and social justice issues. As a mother and public speaker, she has spoken at dozens of venues in Canada and internationally, given hundreds of media interviews, and appeared in several documentaries.
A lawsuit filed in January 2017 against the world’s largest Baptist college—Baylor University in Waco, Tex.—alleges that 31 football players committed 52 rapes between 2011 and 2014, including gang rapes, all while school authorities looked away. The ugly details of Baylor’s rape culture fill a recent documentary book, Violated.

During recent U.S. elections, Republican comments about rape, many explicitly driven by Christian belief and intended to justify opposition to abortion, swelled to fill a multi-page “Rape Advisory Chart” and included the idea that babies conceived from rape are blessings from God. In the early 20th century, the Rockefeller Foundation distributed a series of rituals to purify her. In no case, including in the New Testament, is the woman’s consent required for sexual contact.

Male-female relationships in the Bible are determined by a property ethic. In the Ten Commandments, the prohibition against coveting property that belongs to your neighbor is part of a broader prohibition against coveting property that belongs to another man: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.” (Exodus 20:17NIV)

Under Levitical law, men have legal rights that guard their property and claim a woman for their own. A woman who does not belong to her husband is a “ruined woman.” Stories about Christian martyrs abound about rape, many explicitly driven by Christian belief and intended to justify opposition to abortion, swelled to fill a multi-page “Rape Advisory Chart” and included the idea that babies conceived from rape are blessings from God. In the early 20th century, the Rockefeller Foundation distributed a series of rituals to purify her. In no case, including in the New Testament, is the woman’s consent required for sexual contact.

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Under Levitical law, men have legal rights that guard against theft and property damage, including damage to women. Coerced sex is considered wrong only when it occurs outside of the contractual agreements men have with each other. In such cases, the punishments for rape have to do not with compassion or trauma to the woman herself but with honor, tribal purity, and a sense that a used woman is damaged goods. A rapist can be forced, essentially, to marry his victim. By contrast, a woman who voluntarily gives up her purity may be killed because she has transformed herself from a family asset to a liability.

God’s purpose for women in the Bible is childbearing. Martin Luther, who brought us the concept of “sola scriptura” meaning Christianity based solely on the authority of the Bible, had this to say: “Women should remain at home, sit still, keep house and bear and bring up children. If a woman grows weary and, at last, dies from childbearing, it matters not. Let her die from bearing; she is there to do it.” He drew his scripturally informed opinion from the biblical record broadly but most specifically from the words of Paul’s letter to Timothy: “Women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith and holiness with propriety” (1 Tim. 2:15).

Virtually all Bible books, like almost all Hollywood movies, fail to pass the Bechdel Test: *Are there two named female characters who talk to each other about anything other than men?* In the Bible, as in Hollywood, women exist largely as props in plot lines about male protagonists. Biblical plot lines are even more homogenous than Hollywood, in the plotlines about male protagonists. Biblical plot lines are even more homogenous than Hollywood, in the plotlines about male protagonists. Biblical plot lines are even more homogenous than Hollywood, in the plotlines about male protagonists. Biblical
including his livestock, children and wives, and Yahweh later replaces them with new ones.

There is no sense, ever, in the Bible, that a woman can be forced to submit to humping by their brothers-in-law until they produce sons. Presumably any of these women can be laid at any time, at a man’s discretion, including his livestock, children and wives, and Yahweh later replaces them with new ones. Yahweh might think about when is best to bring another child into the world and then replaces them with new ones. Yahweh does not think about their children’s future, or even less their children’s futures, including his livestock, children and wives, and Yahweh later replaces them with new ones.

The Bible story in which someone declines nurture; or even less that bringing a child into the world and then replaces them with new ones. Yahweh might think about when is best to bring another child into the world and then replaces them with new ones. Yahweh does not think about their children’s future, or even less their children’s futures, including his livestock, children and wives, and Yahweh later replaces them with new ones.

The Bible is loaded with divinely sanctioned rape babies. The Bible both depicts and scripts a world in which women have no choice about who they are given to. Daughters can be given in marriage or sold outright, slaves can be sent by their mistresses to bear proxy babies, virgin war captives can be claimed as wives, widows can be forced to submit to humping by their brothers-in-law until they produce sons. Presumably any of these women can be laid at any time, at a man’s discretion, including his livestock, children and wives, and Yahweh later replaces them with new ones. Yahweh might think about when is best to bring another child into the world and then replaces them with new ones. Yahweh does not think about their children’s future, or even less their children’s futures, including his livestock, children and wives, and Yahweh later replaces them with new ones.

There is no sense, ever, in the Bible, that a woman can control the sexual behavior of females in whose offspring she will then invest their time and energy. The Abrahamic virginity code, which evolved before the time of contraception and patriarchy tests, ensured a greater degree of confidence that men were in fact raising their own children. A woman who bled on her wedding night was unlikely to be carrying another man’s sperm or fetus or to have formed an emotional bond that would result in an increasing extramarital liaison. By increasing male confidence that the offspring of their wives were their own, the virginity code may have increased the investment of men in pregnant women and dependent children, helping both to survive in a harsh desert environment where producing food was hard work.

The harshness of this environment and human frailty within it probably contributed to the mentality that so plagues many Abrahamic adherents. From the time we humans have first been able to understand our plight we have struggled to transcend it. But much of life’s hardships cannot be transcended; it must simply be endured. In the time before modern science this was even more true than it is today. Consequently all of the world’s great religions cultivate acceptance or resignation as a virtue. Islam literally means submission. Buddhism centers itself on the absence of desire, on “living into” what is. Christianity teaches that God’s actions are not for us to question. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not unto your own understanding.” “The Lord works in mysterious ways.” Submission, accept, don’t question. In all cases, submission has a hierarchy: men are to submit themselves to the will of God or to the divine flow; women are to submit both to the will of God and to the will of men.

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Christians killed Muslims in the Crusades. Christians killed Jews in many massacres. Meanwhile, another dimension was added: Christians began killing fellow Christians as “heretics.”

During the first millennium of the church, execution for doctrinal deviation was rare. In A.D. 385 at Trier, Germany, bishops put to death Priscillian and his followers for doubting the Trinity and the Resurrection. At Alexandria in 415, the great woman scientist Hypatia, head of the Alexandria library, was beaten to death by monks and other followers of St. Cyril, who viewed her science much as the church later viewed Galileo’s. At Constan tinople around 550, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian killed multitudes of non-conformists to impose Christian orthodoxy. Otherwise, heresy was a minor issue.

After the turn of the millennium, a few prosecutions occurred. King Robert the Pious burned 13 heretics at Orleans in 1022. At Goslar, Germany, a community of Christians—deviants whose beliefs made them unwilling to kill chickens—were convicted of heresy and hanged in 1051. In 1141, priest Peter Abelard was sentenced to life imprisonment because he listed church contradictions in a book titled “Yes and No.”

This was the beginning of numerous “internal crusades” against nonconforming Christians and rebellious lords.

Another group targeted for extermination were the Waldensians, followers of Peter Waldo of Lyon, lay preachers who sermonized in the streets. The church decreed that only priests could preach, and commanded them to cease. They persisted. The Waldensians had been excommunicated as heretics at the Council of Vero na in 1184, and the Albigensian crusade was directed at them as well. Executions ensued for five centuries. The lay preachers fled to Germany and Italy, where they frequently were caught and burned. Some hid in caves. In 1487, Pope Innocent VIII declared an armed crusade against Waldensians in the Savoy region of France.

Also condemned were the Amalricans. French theologian Alamric of Bena preached that all people are potential ly divine, and that church rites aren’t needed. After his death in the 1300s, his followers were burned alive as heretics, and his body was dug up and burned.

A similar fate befell the Apostolic Brethren, who preached and sang in public. Leader Gerhard Segarelli was burned as a heretic in 1300. His successor, Dolcino, led survivors into fortified places to withstand attacks and wage counterattacks. Troops of the bishop of Milan overran their fort and killed nearly all of them. Dolcino was burned in 1307.

In 1318 a group of Celestine or “Spiritual” Franciscan monks were burned because they refused to abandon the primitive simplicity of Franciscan garb and manners. Others executed as heretics were Beghards and Beguines, who lived in Christian communes, and the Brothers of the Free Spirit, a mystical order of monks. The Knights Temp lars, religious warriors of an order that originated in the Crusades, were accused in France in 1307 of spitting on crucifixes and worshiping the devil. They were subjected to extreme torture, which killed some of them; others “confessed.” About 70 were burned at the stake.

Killing heretics was endorsed by popes and saints. They quoted Old Testament mandates such as “He who blasphem es the name of the Lord shall be put to death.” St. Thomas Aquinas declared: “If coiners and other malefactors are justly doomed to death, much more may heretics be justly slain.”

Efforts to stamp out heresy led to the establishment of the Holy Inquisition, one of mankind’s supreme horrors. In the early 1200s, local bishops were empowered to identify, try, and punish heretics. When the bishops proved ineffective, traveling papal inquisitors, usually Dominican priests, were sent from Rome to conduct the purge.

Pope Innocent IV authorized torture in 1252, and the Inquisition chambers became places of terror. Accused heretics were seized and locked in cells, unable to see their families, unable to know the names of their accusers. If they didn’t confess quickly, unspeakable cruelties began. Swiss historian Walter Nigg recounted:

“The thumbstick was usually the first to be applied. The fingers were placed in clamps and the screws turned until the blood spurted out and the bones were crushed. The defendant might be placed on the iron torturing chair, the sea of which consisted of sharpened iron nails that could be heated red-hot from below. There were the so-called ‘boots’ which were employed to crush the shinbones. Another favorite torture was dislocation of the limbs on the rack or the wheel on which the heretic, bound hand and foot, was drawn up and down while the body was weighted with stones. ‘So that the torturers would not be disturbed by the shrieking of the victim, his mouth was stuffed with cloth. Three- and four-hour sessions of tort ures were nothing unusual. During the procedure, the instruments were frequently sprinkled with holy water.”

The victim was required not only to confess that he was a heretic, but also to accuse his children, wife, friends and others as fellow heretics, so that they might be subjected to the same process. Minor offenders and those who confessed immediately received lighter sentences. Serious heretics who repeated were given life imprisonment and their possessions were confiscated. Others were led to the stake in a procession and church ceremony called the “auto-da-fé” (act of faith). A papal statute of 1231 decreed burning as the standard penalty. The actual executions were performed by civil officers, not priests, as a way of preserving the church’s sanctity.

Some inquisitors cut terrible swaths. Robert le Bourge sent 183 to the stake in a single week. Bernard Gui convicted 930—confiscating the property of all 930, sending 307 to prison, and burning 42. Conrad of Marburg burned every suspect who claimed innocence. He met his
downfall when he accused a count of riding on a crab in a diabolical rite, whereupon an archbishop declared the charge groundless and Conrad was murdered, presumably by agents of the count.

Historically, the Inquisition is divided into three phases: the medieval extermination of heretics; the Spanish Inquisition in the 1400s; and the Roman Inquisition, which began after the Reformation.

In Spain, thousands of Jews had converted to Christianity to escape death in recurring Christian massacres. A total of 879 heresy trials were recorded in Mexico in the late 1500s. The horror persisted until modern times. The Spanish Inquisition was suppressed by Joseph Bonaparte in 1808, restored by Ferdinand VII in 1814, suppressed again in 1820, and finally eradicated in 1834.

Lord Acton, himself a Catholic, wrote in the late 1800s: “The principle of the Inquisition was murderous…. The popes were not only murderers in the great style, but they also made murder a legal basis of the Christian Church and a condition of salvation.”

THE CRUSADES

Through the haze of legend, the Crusades are remembered as a romantic quest by noble knights wearing crimson crosses. In reality, the Crusades were a sickening nightmare of slaughter, rape, looting, and chaos—mixed with belief in magic. The crusaders killed nearly as many Christians and Jews as they did Muslims, their intended target.

Pope Urban II launched the First Crusade in 1095 to wrest the Holy Land from infidels. “Deus Vult” (God wills it) became the rallying cry. Around Europe, masses of zealots swarmed into mob-type armies led by charismatic priests. Tens of thousands followed an unwashed priest, Walter the Penniless, in southwest Germany to conquer Limburg. In turn, thousands of crusaders died in confused fighting in Bulgaria. Only a fraction of the peasant mobs finally reached Muslim Turkey, where they soon were exterminated by Turkish armies.

Organized regiments of Christian knights followed the rabble, bringing professionalism to the Crusade. Accompanying bishops blessed their atrocities. The advancing legions decapitated Muslims and carried the heads as trophies. During three sieges—at Nicaea, Antioch, and Tyre—crusaders catapulted Muslim heads into the surrounded cities to demoralize defenders. After a victory on the Syrian coast near Antioch, Frankish crusaders brought 500 heads back to camp. Three hundred of them were put on stakes before the city to torment defenders atop the walls. Chronicler-priests recorded that a crusader bishop called the impaled heads a joyful spectacle for the people of God. The other 200 heads were catapulted into Antioch. Inside, Muslims decapitated Antioch’s Christian residents and catapulted their heads outward in a grotesque crossfire. The crusaders finally broke through on June 3, 1098, and slaughtered inhabitants.

Then an arriving Muslim army encircled Antioch and besieged the former besiegers. The Franks were near starvation when one Peter Bartholomew announced that a saint had appeared to him in a vision and disposed that the lance that pierced Christ’s side at the crucifixion was buried beneath a Christian church in Antioch. The Holy Lance was dug up and became a miraculous relic inspiring the crusaders to ferocity. They stormed out of the city in a fanatical onslaught that sent the Muslim soldiers fleeing in panic, abandoning their camp—and their wives. Chronicler Fulcher of Chartres proudly recorded: “When their women were found in the tents, the Franks did nothing evil to them except pierce their bellies with their lances.”

Similar hordes led by priests Volkmair and Gottschalk likewise massacred Jews of Prague and Regensburg, Bavaria. Occasionally, victims were given a last-minute opportunity, at swordpoint, to save their lives by converting to Christianity.

In the various peasant armies moved through Christian Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria, they pillaged the countryside for food, provoking battles with local peoples and armies. In one clash, Peter the Hermit’s army killed 4,000 Christian residents of Zemun, Yugoslavia, then burned them as “secret Jews” and their Muslim counterparts. Dozens to the American colonies, to punish Indians who reverted to native religions. A total of 2,000 were burned. auto-da-fé processions contained as many as 1,500 “penitents” at a time. The Inquisition was brought by Spaniards to the American colonies, to punish Indians who reverted to native religions. A total of 2,000 were burned.
The victim was required not only to confess that he was a heretic, but also to accuse his children, wife, friends and others as fellow heretics, so that they might be subjected to the same process.

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Introduction

I Techniques and Approach

You may ask why we need yet another book about Christ-ianity. After all, the British Library main catalogue lists nearly 20,000 volumes with ‘Jesus’ in the title and this fact that in an age of scepticism and falling church attendance, people are as fascinated as ever by the story of Jesus and the origins of Christian-ity. Indeed, in recent decades, the number of books appearing has increased exponentially, and is now supported by an avalanche of self-publication and small independent groups, all pursuing the subject of Christian belief from every conceivable angle. This is powerful testimony to the

terrestrial existence as a historical figure. This book is written from such a point of view. I believe, along with very many people, that every part of the traditional story of Jesus is historically suspect. But for me, this purely negative assertion is not enough. The recent profusion of books attempting to explain how, nevertheless, the story of Jesus, enshrined in a religion called Christianity, came to dominate Western civilisation for 2000 years. The Gospels may be fiction—and I shall argue that they are—but their writers claimed to be conveying truths, or perhaps deluded, or were they themselves misled? What was really going on in the first half of the first century ad? It is to questions like these that this book seeks to find answers.

Christianity is a religion founded on assertions about historical events in the first century ad. But these assertions are largely without supporting evidence from outside the Bible and, in places, conflict with what we do know about what was actually happening at the time. This will surprise many. Christians are often taught by their leaders that their faith is supported by the findings of historians and archaeologists, and the media often run stories about new ‘evidence’—new archaeological finds, new manuscripts—that seem to bear out the historical truth of the story in all its key essentials. The idea that the story of Christianity has any basis in historical fact is misguided and wrong. For this reason, there is a plethora of theories to compete with the traditional Christian account, and an increasing supply of titles that offer alternative views—that, for example, Jesus was a revolutionary,1 or a pagan philosopher,2 or even a mag-ic mushroom.3 But the fact that Jesus can [arguably] be demonstrated plausibly to be so many very different things surely points to the truth: the stories about him in the Bible are drawn from and influenced by most not all of these different versions and more, and that his com-posite nature results from fictional mythmaking rather than historical reality. As I shall show, the Jesus of the Gospels—not the Jesus Movement—has never been and, in fact, is historically suspect. But for me, this purely negative assertion is not enough. The recent profusion of books

2There are a multitude of works taking this line—notably Eisenman’s Jesus of Jerusalem.

1Particularly following publication of Richard Dawkins’ The God Delusion.

3Notably, John Allegro’s The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross.

4Notoriously, John Allegro’s The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross.

5i.e. relating to the ‘End of Days’.
on the Dead Sea Scrolls or, indeed, on the Bible as a whole. It does not rely on arcane formulae, numerical calculations, celestial observations, parallels with other religions or esoteric associations with other cults. Nor is it the result of divine revelation, prophetic dreaming or deep insight. It comes from a writer whose training is in literary criticism, it is simply based on detailed and, in some cases, radical critical re-examination of just a few key texts, trying to put aside two millennia of commentary paid to create a context of divinely inspired harmony and coherence. The texts in question are some of the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, the apostle Paul’s letters, the prophecies of Zechariah in the Old Testament, and the Book of Revelation. It is a rather adventurous journey through some of the most controversial texts in the New Testament.

That’s it. Of course, I shall in passing draw much more widely on the Bible and other texts, but these are all incidental to my core argument. I think the answer has been staring us in the face all along. To find it, we just need to sweep aside 2000 years of credulous, uncritical interpretation; read the key texts afresh with an eye to who wrote them and with what agenda; and then ask ourselves what is the most likely explanation for it all.

In judging likelihoods, I have been often guided by two very straightforward ideas. The first is the relatively simple philosophical concept of Occam’s Razor. There are many different versions and expressions of this principle, but in essence, it states that among competing hypotheses, the one that makes the fewest assumptions is probably the right one. It cautions us that whenever we find multiple entities* to explain something, the chance rises that the explanation is false. I am not suggesting that the Razor is infallible, nor am I denying that judgments about what is simple and what is complex will have a considerable degree of subjectivity. But all other things being equal, it is a matter of common observation that if an explanation of something requires one to believe a lot of unlikely things, it will probably turn out to be wrong. Any multiplication of entities probably indicates falsity. As we shall see, the New Testament is full of such multiplicities of events and people. The same names turn up again and again; the same incidents seem to be recounted about what is simple and what is complex will have a considerable degree of subjectivity.

I am no poet but I do think that the truth about the real roots of Christianity lies not in esoteric theories or new discoveries, but in seeing the wood for the trees: no single element of my solution can be ‘proved’ beyond a shadow of a doubt, but taken as a whole, the paradigm offered in the following pages provides a better overall fit with what we know than any other. The reason why there are so many books about Jesus is because the evidence is so contradictory. Focus on any specific issue, and the scope for ‘deep’ disagreement is endless. But accept for the moment that the new paradigm is correct, and it will become apparent how it manages to be ‘wide’ enough to encompass all the more limited theories, and to provide a contextual framework in which they all then find their natural place. This new paradigm is the basis on which I invite the reader to judge this book.

II Jesus and Paul

The subjects of this book have preoccupied me (and off) for the last forty years. Who exactly was the historical Jesus? What did he believe and teach? How does this relate to the actions and teachings of the early disciples and apostles who together laid the foundations for Chris- tianity as we know it today? Did all New Testament Christian answers to these questions are unsatisfactory: the Christian narrative, as set out in the Bible and subsequently mediated by Church doctrines, is simply unbel-ievably. I say this, not because of the supernatural ele- ments, but because many readers may feel this is enough, but because even putting rational scepticism to one side, the Bible itself is too full of internal inconsistencies (which we shall look at later) to be accepted as in any real sense, the ‘Word of God’. This is hardly a new perception. Even the New Testament has wrested beliefs from the earliest days of the Church. However, in doing so, they have been constrained by their belief in what is known as ‘scriptural inerrancy’—theuptonguion conviction that the Bible is inerrant and there- fore by definition cannot be mistaken, inaccurate or con-tradictory. God is perfect and therefore, His Holy Word must be perfect, too. If Scripture appears imperfect, the mistake derives from man’s imperfect understanding.

I do not start from this perspective, which requires a step of faith I see no reason to take. Just because the Bible (or to be more precise, the Christian Church, based on one or two of the individual documents that comprise the Bible) claims to represent the Word of God is no rea-son for deep skepticism that he and his generation were the first really to experience. Matthew Arnold provides the quota- tion at the start of this book:

Not deep the poet sees, but wide.*

Indeed, I could make the same claim of inerribility for The Christian Fallacy—but that of course would be ludicrous...
We shall see that this ‘faith/work’ dichotomy has its roots in the more parochial concerns of the early Jesus Movement, but Paul’s interpretation of it lies at the heart of all these later developments in Christianity. It is an extraordin ary fact that if one is looking for a clear statement of Christian theology on this matter—or indeed any other—one would be hard put to find it in any of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life. It was Paul who developed the theolo gy of Christianity in his letters to various early Churches, and it is to Paul that theologians look for answers to the key issues of Christianity as an organised religion. This is downsplayed to some extent by all versions of Christi anity, although especially by the Catholic Church, which is downplayed to some extent by all versions of Christi anism. Nevertheless, he is still traditionally regarded by ‘reformed’ churches as simply explaining and promulgating what Jesus originally taught. And if this book is to grapple with the puzzle of the historical Jesus, it must inevitably therefore also deal with similar questions about Paul—who he was and what he taught.

Those who, like me, reject the standard Christian narrative broadly take one of two views about Jesus himself. One view, and probably the most prevalent among those who have no active Christian faith but have never delved into the evidence, is that Jesus was an historical person, but that he was not the ‘Son of God’. In this view, Jesus is seen as variously, a Teacher, a Prophet, a ‘Good Man’, a Rebel, a Revolutionary, a Pharisaic Rabbi, an earth man, a Messiah, a Man of God, a Man of God, a Man of God. In this view, Jesus was a mystical figure called Jesus, but he lived so long before the Christian era that early Christians felt themselves able to give him any role they desired. I shall show how the demonisation of Paul in some quarters results from an erroneous chronology of events, combined with a resulting confusion between Paul and a character called Simon Magus. Many people regard books such as this as point less. Ironically, this view can be held by both sceptics and traditional believers alike. On the one hand, believers argue that it is all beside the point. Whoever or whatever Jesus was is unimportant; it is the Jesus of faith that matters—the Jesus that teaches us how to live and gives us the promise of everlasting life. Yet Christianity makes the unique claim that Jesus was not only God but that he walked amongst us and died a grisly death for us. It is founded on this historical claim, and must surely therefore be open to rational, historical enquiry. On the other hand, sceptics who take the extreme view, argue that we can never know the truth of these things, they all happened so long ago, and the evidence we have is so fragmentary, contradictory and compromised by bias and distortion that any search is impossible. In my view, the Bible is actually full of clues to the puzzle of the histori cal Jesus. Those clues alone can never produce historical certainty but we can search for a hypothesis that best fits the evidence and clues we have.

To do this we need to treat all the evidence on an equal basis. Each document (irrespective of whether it has been sanctioned as part of the Bible or not) must be examined in the same way, using basic textual critical techniques. In particular, this means that we must wher ever possible identify for each text who wrote it and, more important, why—identify that is, what political, personal and religious biases influenced the original writer and, equally important, may also have influenced subsequent editors—we can never assume that what we read today is precisely what the author wrote. In my view this requires careful textual study, but also a broad grasp of historical context. There is so much in the written record that is inconsistent and contradictory that unless one stands back to see the whole picture, one can easily be misled. Nevertheless. And this leads then to the inevitable idea that his motives must have been material—either power or money, or both.

However, there is also a second view about Jesus, probably less popular but growing in its adherents as ratio nal enquiry into scriptural texts continues, and as more ancient texts are discovered, that far from being a mortal man, Jesus emerged from within Jewish tradition as a Messiah, a Man of God, a Man of God, a Man of God. This view can be held by both sceptics and traditional believers alike. On the one hand, believers argue that it is all beside the point. Whoever or whatever Jesus was is unimportant; it is the Jesus of faith that matters—the Jesus that teaches us how to live and gives us the promise of everlasting life. Yet Christianity makes the unique claim that Jesus was not only God but that he walked amongst us and died a grisly death for us. It is founded on this historical claim, and must surely therefore be open to rational, historical enquiry. On the other hand, sceptics who take the extreme view, argue that we can never know the truth of these things, they all happened so long ago, and the evidence we have is so fragmentary, contradictory and compromised by bias and distortion that any search is impossible. In my view, the Bible is actually full of clues to the puzzle of the histori cal Jesus. Those clues alone can never produce historical certainty but we can search for a hypothesis that best fits the evidence and clues we have.

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THE PREACHING OF SAINT PAUL AT EPHESUS, BY EUSTACHE LE SUEUR, 1649

The simplest words trip us up. We see words and phrases like ‘Christ’, ‘Lord’ or ‘Lamb of God’ and we interpret them as evidence of the identity of Jesus, or the claims he made. We see his actions and his words and we conclude that he is the Son of God. This book will offer a new paradigm for the founda tion of Christianity. It will trace how longstanding Jewish ideas about God and His interactions with humanity underwent unparalleled distortion during the upheavals in the first century AD, to emerge unrecognis able as the Christian religion. Jewish concepts of the historic role of the Jewish people as the priestly nation to the world somehow emerged as a religion in which the Jews had no role at all. Related beliefs about how the world would end, and the prophetic and messianic figures that would herald those events, emerged as the novel concept of a Son of God whose death redeems the world. And I shall argue that we can trace almost exactly how this happened from texts that survive from those times—not obscure, recently discovered manuscripts of ambiguous meaning, but mainstream texts that survive in the very Bibles that adorn bookshelves in virtually every home in Western civilisation.

The problem is that it is very hard indeed to read those texts outside the dominant Christian paradigm. The simplest words trip us up. We see words and phrases like ‘Christ’, ‘Lord’ or ‘Lamb of God’ and we interpret their meanings in ways that the Jews who wrote them would never have intended. But the reality is that those Jews were themselves capable of bizarre and per verse interpretations of their own, and their propensity to do so perhaps created the environment within which later Christian distortions became possible. But if we can step outside the dominant Christian paradigm and look on these texts with fresh eyes and an unbiased, rational perspective, we shall see that, quite amazingly, the his torical truth can be recovered, and that truth will indeed set us free.
The Truth Seeker, January 9, 1904.

HISTORIC MEANS OF GRACE

Prevenient Imputation by Virtue of Which the Relation of Law Was Made.

WORD OF REPROOF.

"By the Right Aquitition!"

The Rock.

The sun rose high in the eastern sky, and the dew lay thick on the ground when the fisherman, on the bank of the river, reached for the bait to start his day. As he dressed his hook, he pondered the words of the prophet: "You shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

They are watching me!

The fisherman was startled and turned to see the birds of prey circling overhead. He quickly readjusted his line and cast it into the water, hoping to escape their watchful eyes.

They are watching me!

The fisherman's heart raced as he watched the birds of prey descend upon his line. He quickly pulled on the reel, trying to reel in his catch before the birds could make off with it. As he struggled, he heard the words of the prophet once more: "You shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

They are watching me!

The fisherman was now completely cut off from the world, as the birds of prey surrounded him, their talons outstretched. He knew he was trapped, and the words of the prophet echoed in his mind: "You shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

They are watching me!

The fisherman tried to think of any way to escape the birds of prey, but it was all in vain. He knew he was destined to die at their hands, and the words of the prophet resounded in his mind: "You shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

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The Inquisition is as deeply rooted in modernity as the scientific tradition it opposed.

“Well, I didn’t expect a kind of Spanish Inquisition,” the mild-mannered Englishman grumbles at a woman’s questioning—and then the door opens and in rush Michael Palin, Terry Gilliam, and Terry Jones, wearing blood-red cardinal’s robes and waxed mustaches and golden crosses.

“Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!” Palin announces with ominous self-satisfaction, eyes bright beneath a broad-brimmed hat, as the Monty Python sketch continues, only to get caught up in the difficulties of enumerating the things one does expect from the Spanish Inquisition. (Our chief weapon is surprise—surprise and fear. Our two weapons are fear and surprise. And ruthless efficiency. Our three weapons are fear and surprise and ruthless efficiency, and an almost fanatical devotion to the Pope. Our four—no! Amongst our weaponry are such elements as fear and—I’ll come in again.) The joke, of course, is that the Spanish Inquisition as a byword for cruel tyranny looks absurd in a modern setting.

In God’s Jury: The Inquisition and the Making of the Modern World (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), Cullen Murphy tries to find out why people once did expect the Spanish Inquisition, and if the inquisitors have vanished or merely changed clothes. He believes that the Inquisition, far from being a “medieval” relic, is an institution as deeply rooted in modernity as the scientific tradition that it opposed. Its fanaticism, its implicit totalitarianism (with inquisitors investigating every crevice of its victims’ lives, from how they cooked chicken to how they made love), its sheer bureaucratic brutality—in short, its surprise, fear, ruthless efficiency, and fanatical devotion to the Pope—make it central to who we are and what we do. Its thumbprint is everywhere: the Gestapo, the K.G.B., the Stasi. Even our own Guantánamo-making apparatus—more than twelve hundred government organizations focus on national-security concerns, Murphy tells us—has a forebear in Torquemada and the men in the red hats.

Is the Inquisition still alive? Murphy, as in his book “Are We Rome?,” asks a question that is, in a way, too large to be answered. Yet this roominess is also the book’s virtue. The little-thing-that-did-that-big-thing pop history usually tries to squeeze enough juice from a tiny subject to make a book. Murphy, by contrast, takes a great big subject and tries to walk right around it. If you’re worn out or confused by the end, at least you’ve seen a lot.

By Adam Gopnik
Murphy’s tone is calm, even good-humored, but he can vibrate to the victims’ preserved cries for mercy, which he reproduces from transcripts that the Inquisition kept. The good ghost of Garry Wills’s historical writing haunts his pages—the same kind of open-ended, casually erudite inquiry scrutinized at length and from a liberal-Catholic point of view. He makes a grand and scary tour of inquisitorial moments, racing back and forth in history from Torquemada to Dick Cheney, and from Guantánamo to Rome; we see there when Giordano Bruno was burned to death, on the orders of Cardinal Bellarmine, and then are asked to compare our own readiness to torture when what we fear threatens us.

Murphy’s point, entirely convincing, is that Cheney’s “one per cent doctrine”—if there’s any chance that terrorists might get their hands on weapons of mass destruction, we have an obligation to do whatever we have to do to make sure that they haven’t—is ancient and all too easily universalized. Torturers always do their work with regret, and out of last-ditch necessity, certain that the existence of their country or their church or their values depends on it. No one burns people alive by halves. If you believe that you know the truth of the cosmos or of history, then the crime of causing pain to one person does seem trivial compared with the risk of permitting the death or damnation of thousands. We had no choice is what the Grand Inquisitor announces in Dostoevsky. We know the cruellest of fanatics by their exceptionally clear consciences. Generations of students were taught that the Spanish Inquisition was a permanent office of the Church in the Iberian peninsula, particularly active in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Using torture and fear, inquisitors forced confessions from suspected heretics and hidden Jews—conversos who continued the clandestine practice of their former faith. Once discovered, they were marched through autos-da-fé: grand penitential parades, which often culminated in a public burning. The archetypal inquisitor was, supposedly, Tomás de Torquemada, the fifteenth-century “hammer of heretics,” who looked for crypto-Jews and crypto-Muslims under every paella pan and helped push forward the decree that expelled all the Jews from Spain, in 1492. (He’s the guy the Python people are pretending to be like when they come rushing in.) The Inquisition’s omnipresence created a climate of fear so acute that it helped paralyze Spanish thought on the brink of the modern age, and led to the breakdown of Spanish intellectual life. While the Inquisition was most notorious and most effective in Spain, it spread throughout Europe, taking hold in Italy, for instance, long enough to burn up Bruno and shut up Galileo.

As Murphy learns, however, professional scholars now tell the story very differently. By consensus, historians have come to reject the idea of a more or less unitary Inquisition, as it was traced by the Philadelphia historian an Henry Charles Lea, a century ago: rather, there were many inquisitions, started and stopped in various places under independent authority and without any single program or control. Murphy goes to visit the two most important revisionists. The first is a memorable figure by any standard: the elder Netanyahu, Bibi’s now hundred-and-one-year-old father, Benzion, who, over years of research, has established, at least to his own satisfaction, that the idea of a flourishing clandestine community of Iberian Marranos, who paid lip service to Christian rites and rituals while secretly remaining Jews, is a myth, invented by the Inquisition for its own evil ends and taken up, much later, by the Jews, in the hope that it would make their ancestors seem less fearful and more resistant. Netanyahu’s revisionism is, in certain ways, limited: his mordant point is not so much that the Inquisition doesn’t deserve its reputation for cruelty as that its victims don’t deserve theirs for moral courage. In reality, he argues, the fifteenth-century Jews who converted tried to stay that way, and to practice the new faith of their neighbors as best they could. The myth was invented by the persecutors out of frustration with their inability to dispossess the Jews as a class. If they sneakily made themselves over into Christians in order to keep money and position, then they must have been cheating all along, being Jews. Netanyahu denies that he has any end in mind save disinterested historical inquiry—“I write only as a historian, to find out how it really was,” he says to Murphy—but this seems like the Freudian case where what the patient denies is the place to dig. The lesson Netanyahu obviously takes, and teaches, from his study can be summed up in three words: assimilation is impossible. Anti-Semitism is too deeply implanted in Gentile cultures to be assuaged by softening or even renouncing your identity as a Jew. The acquiescent Jewish hope that if you stop eating kosher you will stop eating you is an illusion. There were no “hidden Jews,” any more than there were secrets of the Elders of Zion. It didn’t matter. The Spanish Catholics didn’t have any real interest in saving the Jews’ souls; they just wanted their houses and their money. The implicit contemporary corollary is that Arabs have no real interest in peace or accommodation with the Jews in Israel, except as strictly controlled and fearful second-class citizens. (The truth of Netanyahu’s opening page The Inquisition Tribunal, Francisco Goya 1812-1819. Depiction of an auto-da-fé, or Spanish “Act of Faith” by an Inquisition Tribunal, Inscape a Church. The Accused Are Wearing Pointed Dunce Caps and Dressed in Sambenitos Which Describe Their Crimes.

But while the Inquisition was most notorious and most effective in Spain, it spread throughout Europe, taking hold in Italy, for instance, long enough to burn up Bruno and shut up Galileo.
view of the Inquisition is much debated. There does seem to be evidence that Marrano practices persisted: the Inquisition, after all, went so far as to look for recipes from suspected crypto-Jews and seems to have found them.

The revisionism that Murphy finds in the work of another leading historian of the Inquisition, Henry Kamen, a Brit now resident in Barcelona, is at once more academically orthodox and more unsettling. In a much praised 1997 study, Kamen takes apart the acts of the inquisitors in Spain, turn by turn and torture by torture. And yet he concludes by saying, basically, Well, sure, they burned people alive and tortured people and organized nightmarish parades where people were forced to wear degrading uniforms—but they did it differently and less often than you might think. The sequential inquisitions had different degrees of severity, authority, and bureaucratic power. The inquisitors themselves, even at their worst, didn’t burn people alive: they handed them over to the civil executioners to do it. Though they tortured people, they didn’t do it any more than the secular guys did, and there was usually a doctor around. The full-scale autos-da-fé that Voltaire satirizes and Goya draws were expensive and therefore relatively rare, and, in any case, were essentially over by the time Goya and Voltaire were describing them.

What’s more, Kamen argues, the Spain of the Inquisition was essentially pre-modern: the Holy Office, as the Inquisition was properly called, depended less on an omnipresent police force than on a pervasive system of informers. This meant that pretty much everyone was implicated, and the Inquisition was more Spanish than Inquisition. Nor could the Inquisition alone have condemned Spain to centuries of backwardness in science and education; after all, Cervantes thrived while the Inquisition did. Besides, the anti-Catholic inquisition, in seemingly “progressive” England, was just as violent, though it preferred to tear Jesuits’ eyes out with a scaffold rather than burn them to bits. There were a lot of other reasons, economic and linguistic, that Spain became a backwater for so long. Where, for obvious reasons, most twentieth-century accounts of the Inquisition focus on the persecution of the Jews, older accounts make more, for equally obvious reasons, of the persecution of Protestants. (It’s certainly true that you can’t see the Inquisition outside the context of the Reformation, which really did present an existential threat to the Roman Catholic Church. The inquisitors weren’t crazy to think that they had mortal enemies out there.)

Kamen’s book represents the academic orthodoxy on the subject now. Indeed, the British historian Helen Rawlings, in her 2006 study “The Spanish Inquisition,” meets Kamen’s work and raises him. She doesn’t whitewash her subject. She explains that Spain in the early sixteenth century was an especially thriving spot for Erasmians, followers of the great humanist Erasmus; the Holy Office made sure that all the prominent humanists “chose to leave Spain rather than fall victims to the campaign to discredit their tolerant tradition,” such that “by the mid-1530s, the Inquisition, under heavy Dominican influence, had effectively enforced silence on humanist scholarship as part of its campaign to turn Spain into a fortress against heresy.” Yet she ends with this chillingly condensing sentence: “While the Inquisition did not often burn men alive for thinking the wrong thoughts, it did not alter the truth that it burned men alive for thinking the wrong thoughts—that it raised the casual cruelty of previous intolerance to a theatricalized black Mass.

And then history written without sufficient imagination risks a failure of basic human empathy. We sometimes think that the historical imagination is the gift of seeing past—seeing past the surface squalors of an era to the larger truths. Really, history is all about seeing in, looking hard at things to bring them back to life as they were, while still making them part of life as it is. If you can’t imagine the horror of being burned alive, then you haven’t, so to speak, lived. Murphy, to his credit, makes us feel not just what it was to see the Inquisition at work but what it was to suffer from it. We learn, for instance, that it was considered a special favor and mercy to supply a heretic, about to be set alight, with a bag of gunpowder to tie around his neck so that he would die from the explosion before he died from the flames.

Reading the revisionist histories, one is often startled by the introduction of shocking material that fails sufficiently to shock the author. Rawlings remarks blandly that, before the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, “there were obvious anomalies between the position of Jews and of Jewish converts in Spanish society that had to be resolved,” and then reproduces a “test of purity of blood,” right out of the Nuremberg laws. (Applicants are to swear that they are “without any stain or taint of Jew- ish, Moorish, or Converso origin.”) Is it anachronistic, in the sense of imputing modern feelings to ancient acts, to be sickened by such things? Well, not if one imagines asking the threatened conversos how they felt about it. Pain is pain in any period.

Murphy quotes another historian of the period, Eamon Duffy, of Cambridge, announcing that he doesn’t out of existence as easily as the Spanish Inquisition. (In fact, Europeans had constant contact with Greek and Roman styles right through the Middle Ages, and the fifteenth-century Italian way of seeing antiquity was more Catholicminded and anarchistic than its predecessors had been.)

History helps us to understand reality by disassembling the big nouns into the small acts that make them up. But if history ignores its responsibility to the big nouns it isn’t doing its job. That there were not weekly autos-da-fé in sixteenth-century Spain does not alter our horror that there were any at all, much less that they were so effectively institutionalized. Their purpose was to frighten and terrify; the mark of their success is that they did not need to happen every day. That the Inquisition did not often burn men alive for thinking the wrong thoughts does not alter the truth that it burned men alive for thinking the wrong thoughts—that it raised the casual cruelty of previous intolerance to a theatricalized black Mass.

The pursuit of scholarly rigor too easily leads historians and of Jewish converts in Spanish society that had to be resolved.” And then history written without sufficient imagination risks a failure of basic human empathy. We sometimes think that the historical imagination is the gift of seeing past—seeing past the surface squalors of an era to the larger truths. Really, history is all about seeing in, looking hard at things to bring them back to life as they were, while still making them part of life as it is. If you can’t imagine the horror of being burned alive, then you haven’t, so to speak, lived. Murphy, to his credit, makes us feel not just what it was to see the Inquisition at work but what it was to suffer from it. We learn, for instance, that it was considered a special favor and mercy to supply a heretic, about to be set alight, with a bag of gunpowder to tie around his neck so that he would die from the explosion before he died from the flames.

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Bruno's cosmology, includes a plurality of worlds, but it's the words we hear inside, even if we didn't do it recently, understanding that he is implicated in it. 

Matter, at pictures of the hooded man on the box at Abu Ghraib, traveling to museums of torture in Spain, him that there's no specific essence to inherit. He visits their pain back to particular life is a true trahison des clercs. 

A historical imagination, of the kind that can bring such suffering back to life, is essential to Goya's genius. The painter knew that, even if the Inquisition and its hideous rituals were becoming archaic, their presence hidous rituals were becoming archaic, their presence 

The Inquisition is to reduce its victims to abstractions, and abandoning the effort to call their pain back to particular life is a true trahison des clercs. 

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THE UNEVEN EVILS THAT FOLLOWED IN THE WAKE OF COLUMBUS

A FEW OTHER CHRISTIAN TOOLS FOR THE CONSIDERATION OF THE HEATHEN.

THIS MAN IS RELIGIOUS

THIS DOG ISN'T

RELIGION IN MAN AND INSTINCT IN THE BRUTE.

Religion! but for them, profane bread, it is professor and earth with demons, hell won, man, and heaven with chimes—Shakespeare.
AA Widens the Gateway for Atheists and Agnostics

Bill Wilson was worried. In the fall of 1938, he had started writing “How It Works,” the fifth chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. The chapter would be the most consequential part of the book. “...[I]f this point we would have to tell how our program for recovery from alcoholism really worked,” Wilson said. The “program” would be the steps that Wilson and his friends had taken to get sober. But Wilson was dreading the reaction of the other members of the group. “The hassling over the four chapters already finished had really been terrific. I was exhausted. On many a day I felt like throwing the book out the window,” he said.

Wilson, Dr. Bob Smith, and the other early members of the group had already developed a “word of mouth program” that was based on four spiritual practices of the Protestant van- gelicals who belonged to the Oxford Group: making a “moral inventory” of their sins or defects; sharing these shortcomings with another person; making restitution to all those who they had harmed, and praying to God for the power to practice these precepts.

As Wilson lay in bed with a pencil and a pad of paper, these steps did not seem detailed enough. They would have to provide guidance to people in places where there were no sober alcoholics to advise them. The steps would also need to be unequivocal. “There must not be a single loophole through which the rationalizing alcoholic could wiggle out,” Wilson said. “Finally, I started to write. I relaxed and asked for guidance.”

With a speed that was astonishing, considering my jangling emotions, I completed the first draft. It took perhaps a half an hour. The words kept right on coming. When I reached a stopping point, I numbered the new steps. They added up to 12.

Here is Wilson’s first draft of the 12 steps:
1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Come to believe that God could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to the care and direction of God.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely willing that God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly on our knees asked Him to remove these shortcomings—holding nothing back.
8. Made a complete list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our contact with God, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual experience as the result of this course of action, we tried to carry this message to others, especially alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

“I was greatly pleased with what I had written,” Wilson said. For the moment, he allowed himself to believe that he had described a program that was unsalable, if not God-given. Wilson’s happiness was short-lived. At that moment, he received a visit from a group member, Horace C., and a new man who had been sober for only three months. Wilson read them his work and waited for applause. He was shocked by their response:

“[Horace] and his friend reacted violently. “Why twelve steps?” they demanded. “You’ve got too much God in these steps; you will scare people away.”

And, “What do you mean by getting those drunks ‘down on their knees’ when they ask to have all their shortcomings removed?”

For the moment, the Wilson acknowledged the disappointment in Wilson’s face, Horace acknowledged that “some of this stuff sounds pretty good.” But he did not withdraw his major objection. “Bill, you’ve got to tone it down. It’s too stiff,” he said.

“The average alcoholic just won’t buy it the way it stands,” Wilson responded with a strenuous defense, insisting on the importance of every word. The debate went on for hours. Finally, Wilson’s wife, Lois, appeared and suggested they take a coffee break, which ended the discussion for the night.

The debate over the twelve steps grew during the following weeks. Horace and his friend were right. Wilson had talked about God a lot. God was mentioned frequently in the chapters that he had already written. While Akron members were generally supportive, the issue divided the New Yorkers into three
groups that Wilson later identified as “conservatives,” “liberals,” and “radicals.” Fitz M., the son of a minister, wanted to go even further in identifying the group as religious. He believed that the book should declare its allegiance to Christian principles, “using Biblical terms and expressions to make this clear,” Wilson said. The liberals had no objection to the use of the word “God” throughout the book, but they were adamantly opposed to identifying their movement with a particular religion. In their view, the religious missions that had attempted to save alcoholics by converting them had failed because the drunks were unwilling to accept their beliefs. Wilson described the third group as “our radical left wing.” At least one member, James Burwell, was an outspoken atheist. The others were either agnostics or believers who nevertheless opposed any mention of God. Henry Parkhurst was a member of this group. A super salesman, he had been among the first to see the importance of the book and had developed the fundraising plan that would make its publication possible. He was also one of the first to express the view that religion should be downplayed. In part, this was an expression of his own religious doubts. But it was also a question of marketing. In a memo about “sales promotion, possibilities,” he expressed concern about alienating the customers:

One of the things most talked about...among us is religious experience. I believe this is incomprehensible to most people. Simple and meaning [sic] words to us—but meaningless to most of the people that we are trying to get this over to. I am fearfully afraid that we are emphasizing religious experience when that is actually something that follows.

Wilson was shocked. “What Henry, Jimmy, and company wanted was a psychological book which would lure the alcoholic in. Once in, the prospect could take God or leave him alone,” he said.

The debate continued into 1939. Shortly before the book was sent to the printer, Parkhurst pushed his argument one last time. He had been sharing his Newark office with Wilson. It was where Wilson had dictated most of the book to a secretary, Ruth Houck. Houck and Fitz, the minister’s son, were present in the office when Parkhurst again insisted on changes in the twelve steps, something Wilson had been refusing to consider. “He argued, he begged, he threatened,” Wilson said. “He was positive we would scare off alcoholics by the thousands when they read those Twelve Steps.” Houck, who was not an alcoholic, was the easiest to persuade. Then, Fitz began to soften. Finally, Wilson agreed to make several changes:

In Step Two we decided to describe God as a “Power greater than ourselves.” In Steps Three and Eleven we inserted the words “God as we understood Him.” From Step Seven we deleted the expression “on our knees.” And, as a lead-in sentence to all the steps we wrote these words: “Here are the steps we took which are suggested as a Program of Recovery. Twelve Steps were to be suggestions only.

While the change made by altering a few words appears superficial at first glance, Wilson later acknowledged that the radicals had secured their major objective. “They had widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through regardless of their belief or lack of belief,” he said.


Before the European Enlightenment, virtually all New Testament experts assumed that hand-ed-down stories about Jesus were first recorded by eye witnesses and were largely biographical. That is no longer the case.

Assuming that the Jesus stories had their beginnings in one single person rather than a composite of several—or even in mythology itself—he probably was a wandering Jewish teacher in Roman-occupied Judea who offended the authorities and was executed. Beyond that, any knowledge about the figure at the center of the Christian religion is remarkably open to debate (and vigorously debated among relevant scholars).

Where was Jesus born? Did he actually have twelve disciples? Do we know with certainty anything he said or did?

As antiquities scholarship improves, it becomes increasingly clear that the origins of Christianity are controversial, convoluted, and not very coherent.

1. THE MORE WE KNOW THE LESS WE KNOW FOR SURE.

After centuries in which the gospel stories about Jesus were taken as gospel truth, the Enlightenment gave birth to a new breed of biblical historians. Most people have heard that Thomas Jefferson secretly took a pair of scissors to the Bible, keeping only the parts he thought were historical. His version of the New Testament is still his only real one. Instead of a convergent view of early Christianity and its founder, we are faced instead with a cacophony of conflicting opinions. This is precisely what happens when people faced with ambiguous and contradictory information cannot bring themselves to say, we don’t know.

This scholastic mess has been an open secret in bibli-cal history circles for decades. Over forty years ago, professors like Robin S. Barbour and Cambridge’s Morna Hooker were complaining about the naïve assumptions underlying the criteria biblical scholars used to gauge the “authentic” elements of the Jesus stories. Today, even Christian historians complain the problem is no better; “authentic” elements of the Jesus stories. Today, even Christian historians complain the problem is no better; they have basic, even crucial, contradictions;

2. THE GOSPELS WERE NOT WRITTEN BY EYEWITNESSES.

Every bit of our ostensibly biographical information for Jesus comes from just four texts—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Though most Christians assume that associates of Jesus wrote these texts, no objective biblical scholars think so. None of the four gospels claims to be written by eye-witnesses, and all were original-ly anonymous. Only later were they attributed to men named in the stories themselves.

While the four gospels were traditionally held to be four independent accounts, textu-al analysis suggests that they all actually are adaptations of the earliest gospel, Mark. Each has been edited and expanded upon, repeatedly, by unknown editors. It is worth noting that Mark features the most fallible, human, no-frills Jesus—and, more importantly, may be an allegory.

All of the gospels contain anachronisms and errors that show they were written long after the events they describe, and most likely far from the setting of their stories. Even more troubling, they don’t just have minor nitpicky contradictions;
torian Flavius Josephus, written around the years 93/94, generations after the presumed time of Jesus. Today historians overwhelmingly recognize this odd Jesus passage is a forgery. (For one thing, no one but the suspected forger ever quotes it— for 500 years!) But defenders of Christianity are loathe to give it up, and supporters now argue it is only a partial forgery.

Either way, as New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman points out, the remaining Jesus passages are not unique to Christianity. They are common Christian beliefs of the late first century, and even if they were 100% genuine would provide no evidence about where those beliefs came from. This same applies to other secular references to Jesus—they definitely attest to the existence of Christians and recount Christian beliefs at the time, but offer no independent record of a historical Jesus.

In sum, while well-established historic figures like Alexander the Great are supported by multiple lines of evidence, in the case of Jesus we have only one line of evidence: the writings of believers involved in spreading the fledgling religion.

4. EARLY CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES WEREN’T THE SAME AS OURS.

At the time Christianity emerged, gospels were a common religious literary genre, each promoting a different version or set of sacred stories. For example, as legends of Jesus sprang up, they began to include “infancy gospels.” As historian Robert M. Price notes, just as Superman comics spun off stories of young Superboy in Smallville, Christians wrote stories of young Jesus in Nazareth using his divine powers to bring clay birds to life or pee-vishly strike his playmates dead.

Early Christians didn’t agree on which texts were sacred, and those included in our New Testament were selected to elevate one competing form of Christianity, that of the Roman Church over others. (Note that the Roman Church also proclaimed itself “catholic” meaning universal.)

Our two oldest complete New Testament collections, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus only go back to the beginning of the fourth century. To make matters worse, their books differ from each other—and from our bibles. We have books they don’t have; they have books we don’t have, like the Shepherd of Hermas and the Gospel of Barnabas.

In addition to gospels, the New Testament includes another religious literary genre—the epistle or letter. Some of our familiar New Testament epistles like 1 Peter, 2 Peter and Jude were rejected as forgeries even in ancient times; today scholars identify almost all of the New Testament books as forgeries except for six attributed to Paul (and even his authentic letters have been re-edited).

5. CHRISTIAN MARTYRS ARE NOT PROOF (IF THEY EVEN WERE REAL).

Generations of Christian apologists have pointed to the existence of Christian martyrs as proof their religion is true, asking “Who would die for a lie?” The short answer, of course, is that all true believers have died in the service of falsehoods they passionately believed to be true—and not just Christians. The obvious existence of Muslim jihadis has made this argument less common in recent years.

But who says that the Christian stories of widespread martyrdom themselves were real? The Book of Acts records only two martyr accounts, and secular scholars doubt that the book contains much if any actual history. The remaining Christian martyr tales first appeared centuries later. Historian Candida Moss’ 2014 book The Myth of Persecution gives a revealing look at how early Christian fathers fabricated virtually the entire tradition of Christian martyrdom—a fact that was, ironically enough, largely uncovered and debunked by later Christian scholars.

6. NO OTHER WAY TO EXPLAIN THE EXISTENCE OF CHRISTIANITY?

Most people, Christians and outsiders alike, find it difficult to imagine how Christianity could have arisen if our Bible stories aren’t true. Beyond a doubt, Christianity began within the first century. Whether it began with a single Jesus, as New Testament scholars of the 19th century thought, or with a flat Jesus, as many modern scholars do, the biblical stories about Jesus had their kernel in a person of a single itinerant preacher, as most New Testament scholars believe.

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That is because either way, the Christ at the heart of Christianity is a figure woven from the fabric of mythology. The stories that bear his name draw on ancient templates imbedded in the Hebrew religion and those of the surrounding region. They were handed down by word of mouth in a cultural context filled with magical beings and miracles. Demons caused epilepsy. Burnt offerings made it rain. Medical cures included mandrakes and dove blood. Angels and ghosts appeared to people in dreams. Gods and other supernatural beings abounded and not infrequently crossed over from their world to ours.

Who, in the midst of all of this, was Jesus? We may never know.
Irony lives. The so-called pro-life movement was the motivation of the man who murdered three people and wounded nine with an assault-style rifle at a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs. He had a history of praising previous attacks on abortion providers. According to an anonymous family member or friend who spoke to the New York Times, the killer said that anti-abortion terrorists were doing “God’s work” and praised as “heroes” members of the Army of God, a group that has claimed responsibility for these kinds of attacks in the past.

According to the National Abortion Federation (NAF), there have been eight murders of abortion providers over the past 38 years, and that anti-abortion activists have perpetuated more than 60,000 recorded instances of harassment, intimidation and violence against them, “including murder, shootings, arson, bombings, chemical and acid attacks, bio-terrorism threats and other forms of violence.”

When abortion was illegal and I ran an underground referral service, I thought it would never be legalized in my lifetime. And then, after Roe vs Wade, I thought abortion would never be illegal again. So in 2016, it was disheartening to see the right-wing religious conservative movement that supposedly wanted to keep government out of our lives, while simultaneously promulgating compulsory transvaginal probes in the process of trying to re-criminalize reproduction rights in my lifetime.

Things seem to be going backward. Last year, The Dinosaur Follies—better known as the Republican presidential debate—where the candidates pimp themselves so blatantly that they have finally turned themselves inside-out. Most despicable is the way they all sucked up to their fanatical anti-choice constituents...

DONALD TRUMP: “I’m pro-life,” he now says, after many years of supporting his prochoice position. He reeks with pandering. Moreover, he thinks that doctors and the women they abort should both be punished.

BEN CARSON: He insists that he’s a fierce opponent of abortion, but he has referred women to doctors who perform abortions, and he was a trustee of a foundation that gave hundreds of thousands of dollars to Planned Parenthood.

LANE PAUL: He claims to be “100 percent pro-life,” and has received a perfect score from the National Right to Life Committee. “I believe life begins at conception and it is the duty of our government to protect this life,” he says. “I will always vote for any and all legislation that would end abortion or lead us in the direction of ending abortion.” He is often referred to as a staunch libertarian, but his positions on reproductive rights don’t align with the Libertarian Party, whose official platform states, “We believe that government should be kept out of the matter, leaving the question to each person for their conscientious consideration.”

CHRIS CHRISTIE: The governor of New Jersey describes himself as pro-life, a sudden switch from his passionate pro-choice position when in 1995 he heard the fetal heartbeat of his unborn daughter. However, his critics said Christie was pandering to the right wing of his party with an eye toward garnering their support in a future campaign for national office. We’ll never know.

MIKE HUCKABEE: This governor worked on Arkansas’s Unborn Child Amendment, which requires the state to do whatever it legally can to protect the life of a fetus. “I would love to see us have in this country what I helped lead in Arkansas,” he said, and in 2007 he proclaimed that the federal government should outlaw abortion. He insists that the Supreme Court should have no power to determine what constitutes a person—essentially an argument to overturn Roe vs Wade, the historic 1973 decision which ruled that a fetus is not a person, and that the decision to abort belongs to a woman. Huckabee asserts, “I think the next president ought to invoke the 5th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution to stop abortion in the country.” The 5th guarantees American citizens “due process” in criminal trials, and the 14th prohibits the government from depriving any person of life, liberty or property without due process of law. Yes, Huckabee says that a fetus should be as officially considered a person as a corporation already is.

So much for the recent Republican presidential debates. Todd Akin originally launched their bizarre anti-abortion movement in 2012. The Missouri Senator candidate who, when he infamously remarked, referring to conception during a rape, “If it’s a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down,” he jumped the proverbial shark. And when Indiana Senator candidate Richard Mourdock declared that he opposes aborting pregnancies conceived by a rapist because “It is something that God intended to happen. I think that even when life begins in that horrible situation of rape,
that it is something that God intended to happen," he jumped the sperm whale.

No professional comedian had the imagination to come up with such tragicomic satirical concepts as those. The funniest thing is that neither Akin nor Mourdock was trying to be funny. They were simply being their ignorant selves, a pair of religious fanatics who worship a micromanaging deity that made them legitimate assholes in the first place. The good news is that they both were defeated on Election Day.

Paul Krassner published The Realist (1958-2001), but when People magazine labeled him “father of the underground press,” he immediately demanded a paternity test. And when Life magazine published a favorable article about him, the FBI sent a poison-pen letter to the editor calling Krassner “a raving, unconfined nut.” George Carlin responded, “The FBI was right. This man is dangerous — and funny; and necessary.”

While abortion was illegal, Krassner ran an underground referral service, and as an antiwar activist, he became a co-founder of the Yippies (Youth International Party). Krassner’s one-person show won an award from the L.A. Weekly. He received an ACLU (Upton Sinclair) Award for dedication to freedom of expression. At the Cannabis Cup in Amsterdam, he was inducted into the Counterculture Hall of Fame — “my ambition,” he claims, “since I was three years old.” He’s won awards from Playboy, the Feminist Party Media Workshop, and in 2010 the Oakland branch of the writers organization PEN honored him with their Lifetime Achievement Award. “I’m very happy to receive this award,” he concluded in his acceptance speech, “and even happier that it wasn’t posthumous.” Paul Krassner’s latest book is an irreverent coffee book, The Realist Cartoons collection. paulkrassner.com
After publishing the Truth Seeker in Paris, Illinois for only a few months, the Bennetts decided to relocate. The couple considered moving to Terre Haute, Indiana where the paper was first printed and contemplated returning to Cincinnati and Louisville where they had previously lived. Chicago, Toledo, and St. Louis were also discussed. But after giving considerable thought to each location, they determined that New York City was the place. After all, in D.M. Bennett’s judgment: “It is the metropolis of our country. The great center and headquarters for trade, commerce, interchange for the industries of nations, and why should it not be also for progressive and advanced ideas?”

In late 1873, D.M. Bennett traveled alone to New York to investigate the city. At the time, there were five hundred newspapers published in New York. Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly, however, was the only periodical considered close to being a “freethought” publication. “The harvest is truly great,” Bennett’s business sense told him, “but the labors are few.” And since he and Mary were natives of the Empire State, it seemed to them a little like “returning home.”
The first person Bennett visited in New York was Stephen Pearl Andrews (1812–1886). An individualist anarchist, dynamic reformer, and abolitionist, Andrews was in the vanguard of the emancipation of slaves in America. As early as 1843 the agitator traveled to England to enlist the aid of the British Anti-slavery Society. He hoped to raise money to pay for the slaves in Texas and envisioned the Republic of Texas as a free state.

As early as 1843 the agitator traveled to England to enlist in the vanguard of the emancipation of slaves in America. Marx's ca and published the first translation in America of Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto in Woodhull and Claffin's Weekly. "Other men were known as factors in reforms," the Truth Seeker reported; "Andrews was the reform itself."

Andrews was a brilliant philosopher, pioneer sociologist, lawyer, doctor, and a master in Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit. Three decades earlier he was recognized as the best Chinese scholar outside of China. Andrews was also a free-love advocate and a utopian romantic. "The Morrisania community, Modern Times, was possibly the first of its kind in America. In the nineteenth century, the free-love movement did not encourage promiscuity but promoted a different sexual morality. Free lovers believed marriage was similar to slavery or prostitution and advocated commitment based on individual choice and love, not on legal restraints.

His popularity since the 1850s was due mainly to his illustrious three-way debate in the pages of the New York Tribune with Horace Greeley and Henry James Sr., the preeminent theological writer. The subject of their published discourse was free love, a lifestyle that Andrews explained the downside of a move to Manhattan with two and a half million people and 470 churches.

Andrews tried to explain the downsides of a move to Manhattan with two and a half million people and 470 churches.

During Bennett's two-week stay in New York, Andrews explained the downside of a move to Manhattan with two and a half million people and 470 churches:

My spiritual sight wasn't sufficiently open to see in that plain countryman the qualities that made D.M. Bennett what he proved to be subsequently; and while he consulted me, while he told me what he came here for, and what he intended to do, I thought I said quite as much to discourage him as to encourage him. I painted the difficulties. I had known hundreds of instances of similar earnest and honest efforts to start this and that and the other enterprise in behalf of reform, almost all of which had sunk into nonentity; and I didn't sense in Mr. Bennett any special power that was going to make him the exception. I had to learn subsequently, by experience, what, if I had had more intuition, I might have known then.

Andrews—or the Pantarch as he was known—created the “Constitution or Organic Basis of the Pantarchy” which he defined as “a new spiritual Government for the world including a new Church” formulated to carry out "the laws of Order and Harmony in the Universe." The eccentric philosopher asserted that there was a science of language, as precise as mathematics or chemistry. By applying this science which he termed Universology, Andrews devised his own scientific universal language that he named Alwato (a language that preceded Esperanto). “I have made it the business of my life to study the high complexity theories developed by his friend Stephen Pearl Andrews. The day before D.M. Bennett was scheduled to embark on his trip around the world in 1881, the editor visited Andrews and expressed his appreciation for his work. Although Andrews was an author and had a profound influence on his writing, the two men discussed the future and D.M. Bennett talked about his goals in the world. The visit lasted two or three hours and Andrews recollected that the editor lamented and seemed reluctant to leave. "There was a sort of forbidding," he recalled, "as though in a high degree of probability, he should never return—never complete his journey; and there was a tenderness and real heartfelt friendliness manifested toward me, personally, that I had no knowledge of before."
D.M. Bennett Pardon Campaign

D.M. BENNETT (1818-1882) was pronounced guilty for violating the Comstock Law in New York on March 21, 1879. “The trial of Dr. Bennett for sending obscene matter through the mails is one of the most important of the day,” declared The New York Sun. The judge’s ruling, a Washington Capitol newspaper reporter opined, “surpassed anything of the sort since Pontius Pilate, and would make it dangerous to mail a Bible or a copy of Shakespeare to anyone.”

On June 5, 1879, the editor of The Truth Seeker was fined $300 and confinement at hard labor for thirteen months to be executed in the Albany Penitentiary. (A twelve-month sentence would have allowed the 60-year-old writer to remain incarcerated in New York City where friends and family could have visited.) “There was malice in that thirteen-month sentence,” wrote future Truth Seeker editor George Macdonald. The judge also denied D.M. Bennett’s request to have the sentence deferred until the Supreme Court could hear the case.

D.M. Bennett was imprisoned for mailing Cupid’s Yokes, a polemical pamphlet written by free-love advocate Ezra Heywood which promoted women’s rights and criticized Anthony Comstock and puritanical obscenity law. As an American citizen—and a passionate opponent of censorship—Bennett believed that he had the right to challenge the ill-defined Comstock Law and publish the pamphlet.

D.M. Bennett’s conviction and imprisonment became a cause célèbre for freethinkers and free-speech advocates. Authors, abolitionists, physicians, reformers, scientists and suffragists supported Bennett’s fight for freedom of the press. A petition with more than 200,000 names—the largest petition campaign of the 19th century—was sent to President Rutherford B. Hayes asking for a pardon for the elderly editor. D.M. Bennett languished in the Albany Penitentiary where, despite suffering from the stigma attached to selling alleged ‘obscenity’ and near death from harsh prison conditions, the First Lady who was lobbying her “Ruddy” in the White House. Lucy Hayes—a devout Methodist known to have considerable influence over her husband—received advice from her pastor and a long petition from Sunday school students opposing a pardon.

“There is great heat on both sides of the question,” Hayes wrote in his diary. “The religious world are against the pardon, the unbelievers are for it.” The author of Cupid’s Yokes, Ezra Heywood, who had also been convicted and imprisoned, received a pardon from Hayes, yet the president refused to pardon a man who merely sold it.

On March 27, 1892—a decade after D.M. Bennett’s death—Hayes confessed in his diary: “I was never satisfied, as I would wish with the correctness of the result to which I came chiefly in deference to the courts. ‘Cupid’s Yokes’ was a free-love pamphlet of bad principles, and in bad taste, but Colonel Ingersoll had abundant reason for his argument that it was not, in the legal sense, ‘an obscene publication.’”

Chase was correct, “every man was in favor of Bennett’s liberation. But not

When the innocent is convicted.

D.M. Bennett Pardon Campaign

D.M. Bennett: The Defender of Liberty and its Martyr.
D.M. Bennett: The Truth Seeker

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Free Inquiry

In 1873, Eugene Macdonald began contributing articles to the Truth Seeker and other freethought publications.

In 1875, Eugene Macdonald began contributing articles to the Truth Seeker and other freethought publications.

One evening while Eugene's mother and D.M. Bennett were walking together to a Liberal League meeting, Mrs. Macdonald asked the editor if he thought her son's recently published article in the Boston Investigator was "pretty good."

"Excellent, excellent!" he exclaimed. "I tell you, my mantle will fall on worthy shoulders."

Eugene Montague Macdonald was born in Chelsea, Maine, on February 4, 1855. Unlike D.M. Bennett, who had a religious background, Eugene and his brother George were second-generation freethinkers. Their mother, Asenath Chase Macdonald, was an enlightened Civil War widow and one of America's first trained nurses.

After her husband's death during the Civil War, Mrs. Macdonald's main concern was choosing a vocation for her sons. She knew and admired Horace Greeley, the famous editor of the New York Tribune. Hoping for the same for Eugene, she decided to place him (at the age of thirteen) in a printing office “almost against his will,” she later recalled.

Eugene served his apprenticeship in New York and worked on a newspaper in Keene, New Hampshire. At the age of eighteen, Eugene moved permanently to New York City. With the help of his mother, he leased a printing office in lower Manhattan. D.M. Bennett hired Macdonald to print the January 1874 issue of the Truth Seeker. Macdonald's office at 335 Broadway (corner of West Broadway and Worth Street) became the publication's first home in New York.

Mrs. Macdonald became concerned after learning that her son used his credit to buy the type needed to print Bennett's freethought journal. She thought Mr. Bennett "might be an honest man, or he might not," since they had previous experience with both kinds. Her first impression of the editor, whom she found sitting with bag and baggage in their office beside the stove with an unshaven face, unkempt hair, and unpolished shoes, was that he looked more like an elderly farmer and "the furthest possible from a literary man."

Her anxiety vanished as soon as Eugene introduced them to each other. "One glance at his kindly, genial face, which spoke so plainly the native goodness of the man, a load was lifted from my heart." The widow was impressed with Bennett's "unimpeachable honesty" and "unwavering fidelity" to his own convictions. Her first thought was: "My boy has found a father." She later characterized her first impressions as almost prophetic because the two became more like "an elder and a younger brother."

Less than a year after D.M. Bennett's death, Mary Wick's Bennett told the Truth Seeker to Eugene who had been like a son to the childless couple. In 1888, Eugene learned firsthand of the powerful alliance between church and state when he was denied the right to vote because of his refusal to swear on the Bible.

Eugene was with the Truth Seeker for 35 years; its editor for a quarter of a century. Macdonald—whose hobby was sailing—masterfully steered the Truth Seeker through freethought's Golden Age and into the 20th century.

After learning that he had tuberculosis in 1908, Eugene left his brother George in charge of the Truth Seeker and moved to Sullivan county New York to "take the cure."

Macdonald spent the summer living in a tent and eating fresh eggs, milk, fruit, and vegetables; a diet that along with the mountain air and sunshine was believed to restore health. At the age of 54, however, Eugene Macdonald died in his wife's arms on February 26, 1909. It is fitting that D.M. Bennett's protégé and the Truth Seeker editor who devoted his entire adult life promoting freethought and fighting for civil liberties died in a village called — Liberty.