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JESUS, HITLER AND THE ABOLITION OF GOD

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For the first five lectures of this series, I've been tracking what would normally be seen as the prehistory of unbelief, doubt and atheism, during the time before it came out into the open and dressed itself up in intellectual clothes; and I've been doing that because I think the *emotional* history of unbelief, the reasons people want to doubt or can't help themselves, is more important than its intellectual and philosophical history, and I think the best way to track that history is to go back far enough to catch doubt in a state of undress and see what its contours really look like. We finished last time with Spinoza, who in the 1660s laid the foundations for modern rationalism, but who I was arguing is also very much part of this emotional story. And so today, in this final lecture, I want to add an epilogue: to trace that emotional history from then till now.

Throughout this series we've been tracing two emotional streams of doubt, streams that eventually mingled and reinforced one another. On one side is the stream of anger: the unbelief of suspicion and defiance, refusing to be taken in or ordered around by priests and their God. That kind of unbelief was eye-catching, but it only became dangerous when it began to assert an ethical framework of its own. Meanwhile, the Reformation, by choosing scepticism as its key religious weapon and fostering an intense, restless self-reflectiveness, made it difficult for many believers to attain the settled, assured faith to which they aspired. Hence the surge in the second emotional stream of unbelief: the stream of anxiety, in which earnestly pious men and women found themselves beset with fears and uncertainties which could not be reasoned away, because they were not in the end based on reason. Instead, some of these unwilling sceptics dealt with their anxieties by turning their doubts into a tool and using it to dig down in the hope of rebuilding their faiths on a sound footing. As their anxieties dissolved one certainty after another, they were left with only one certainty: their commitment to their moral vision, which increasingly seemed not only like the heart of Christianity but also, perhaps, detachable from Christianity. They turned that moral intuition against the tradition that had taught it to them, critiquing Christianity for its failure to embody the ethics of Jesus Christ. And so, the two streams came together. The moral force of the unbelief of anger and the moral urgency of the unbelief of anxiety mixed into a gathering flow of insistent, ethically driven doubts that began carving Christendom's old-established landscape into something new.

As a forest of explicitly anti-religious arguments springs up from the later seventeenth century onwards, it can sometimes be difficult to see the wood for the trees, let alone to trace the subterranean currents of emotion that continued to nourish them. Still, our two intermingled streams of unbelief, anger and anxiety, both continued to flow. Let's look at each of them in turn.

That unbelief remained angry is unmistakable. There was mockery, a perennial way to sidestep difficult questions. If you can make religion look ridiculous, you don't have to tackle the much harder tasks of either proving it false or proving something else true, and you reserve the option of covering your tracks by claiming that you were only joking. And making religion look ridiculous is sometimes so easy that it is irresistible. It's no accident that the early Enlightenment was a golden age of satire, in which it is never quite clear exactly what the author really means or believes. The spoof atheist tracts which students and provocateurs and gadflies were beginning to produce were jokes; they weren't meant to be taken seriously. But you don't play jokes like that unless you think they are funny. At the least, you want your audience to laugh rather than to be outraged. Very likely you want them to wonder, if only for a moment, whether you are right.¹

Spoofing religion has remained a constant theme of unbelief down to the present. The most famous example is probably still Voltaire's Dr Pangloss, with his 'metaphysico-theology-cosmologology' that convinces him that the world is as perfect as could be. The modern era's most compelling literary meditation on unbelief, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, has a neat example of the genre. The debauched father, Fyodor, admits blithely that he expects to be dragged down to Hell with hooks when he dies:

And then I think: hooks? Where do they get them? What are they made of? Iron? Where do they forge them? Have they got some kind of factory down there? You know, in the monastery the monks probably believe there's a ceiling in hell, for instance. Now me, I'm ready to believe in hell, only there shouldn't be any ceiling; that would be, as it were, more refined, more enlightened.²

It is a straight line from here to our modern flowering of religious mockery: Alan Bennett, *Monty Python*, and the incomparable *Father Ted*: more merry absurdism and gentle ridicule than vicious satire, but containing occasional flashes of real anger.

As ever, the primary target of that anger is not God himself, but his earthly representatives. The bitterness about priests which we've traced from the Middle Ages onwards remains alive and well, and not everyone finds it funny. It was the clergy who were the real target of Voltaire's anger. The same mood is even plainer in Tom Paine's *The Age of Reason*, the first authentic anti-Christian bestseller, a book said to have triggered Bible-burning parties on both sides of the Atlantic. Paine's fury was directed not at God, but at churches, which he called 'human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit'.

"I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish Church, by the Roman Church, by the Greek Church, by the Turkish Church, by the Protestant Church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church."

That was not a metaphysical position. In fact, beneath it all, Paine's substantial religious views were surprisingly conventional. It was, as befits one of the heralds of the American revolution, a declaration of independence. And it is absolutely in line with the angry unbelief we saw centuries earlier.³

Two notorious nineteenth-century examples tell the same story. Thomas Huxley is now best-known as 'Darwin's bulldog', although the myth of his triumph over the hapless bishop of Oxford in their debate over evolution in 1860 has grown in the telling. Huxley was certainly more outspoken on religious matters than Charles Darwin himself, and famously coined the term 'agnostic' to describe the scientific unbelief he advocated. But he was also an odd, and very English, kind of unbeliever. The opposite of agnosticism, as he saw it, was not Christianity or religion as such, but what he called 'Ecclesiasticism, or ... Clericalism'. He despised Bishop Wilberforce's title and his officiousness at least as much as his opinions. Remarkably, Huxley claimed to be defending 'the foundation of the Protestant Reformation', by which he meant the 'conviction of the supremacy of private judgement' – in contrast to the 'effete and idolatrous sacerdotalism' which he believed had overtaken the Church of England in his own age.⁴ That was not at all what the first Protestant Reformers had thought they were doing, but Huxley did have a point. He was deploying the same merciless scepticism which the Reformers had weaponised and popularised, and against their traditional targets.

Huxley's much less respectable contemporary Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian anarchist and revolutionary, had strikingly similar concerns. His essay 'God and the State', written during the revolutionary false dawn of the Paris Commune in 1871, boils with rage at 'every religious system' ever invented. Their 'very nature and essence ... is the impoverishment, enslavement and annihilation of humanity for the benefit of divinity'. And so, his fury turned first of all to the slave masters who have perpetrated this crime:

"Whoever says revelation says revealers, messiahs, prophets, priests and legislators inspired by God himself. ... All men owe them passive and unlimited obedience; for ... against the justice of God no terrestrial justice holds. Slaves of God, men must also be slaves of Church and State."

The charge is not that clergy were peddling foolish notions of an imaginary God. It is that they were using those notions to subjugate, exploit and oppress the people. The critique was moral, not philosophical. It was

absolutely in line with the traditional Reformation critique of clerical power. And its moral framework was straightforwardly Christian. These critics did not merely observe that churches oppress their people. They believed that for the strong and cunning to oppress the weak and simple is wrong: an ethic which, as Nietzsche observed with distaste, is distinctive to Christianity.

If they did turn their anger from the clergy to God himself, they did so in the same vein. Tom Paine attacked the Bible, not by mounting textual or historical criticisms, but by declaring it morally unfit for purpose:

“Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and tortuous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon than the Word of God. It is a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind.”

Like Richard Dawkins’ pithy claim that ‘the God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction’, this works by measuring the Bible against an agreed moral standard and finding it wanting – that standard, certainly in Paine’s case, being derived from the Christian tradition itself. Paine found the Bible blasphemous. It defamed God by portraying him as morally deficient. You can see the same logic at work in one of the most common stumbling-blocks for Christian belief in modern times: the traditional doctrine of Hell, which for many people triggered a moral intuition that God simply could not consign a part of his creation to eternal torment. This intuition did not refute the logic of traditional Christian theology: it bypassed it.⁵

Again, at the apogee of this moral anger, we find Bakunin. He recognised that the problem of the clergy could not be separated from the problem of God. If they really were God’s representatives, then they truly would be entitled to enslave humanity. Some writers would have sidestepped at this point into some logical argument that there is no God, but Bakunin recognised that this would be dishonest, and confronted the issue head on:

“If God existed, only in one way could he serve human liberty – by ceasing to exist. ... I reverse the phrase of Voltaire, and say that, *if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him.*”

On the surface, this is ridiculous: wishful thinking taken to its extremes. Bakunin’s syllogism – ‘If God is, man is a slave; now, man can and must be free; then, God does not exist’ – absurdly derives a metaphysical claim from a political opinion. He is a new Canute, not merely ordering the tide to turn but the entire sea to dry up.⁶ But on a deeper level, this is good moral theology. God is by definition good. But the existence of a God is (Bakunin believes) inherently oppressive and therefore evil. Therefore, the very concept of God is self-contradictory. If you accept his premises, the case is watertight. Once again, however, amongst those premises is a very particular moral framework, which presumes liberty is an absolute good. How far that framework is itself of Christian origin is not especially important. The point is that this is how the atheism of anger works. It is only when its *moral* standards come into conflict with God that God has to be abolished.

Alongside, and intertwined with, the unbelief of anger remains the unbelief of anxiety. The agonised Puritan wrestlers with doubt whom we met in the last two lectures have had countless successors down the centuries: individuals who have not embraced the fierce certainties of dogmatic faith or of angry unbelief, people who are sometimes not so much sitting on the fence as impaled on it. Sometimes these agonies have been resolved into more or less settled belief, or unbelief; sometimes doubters have withdrawn, exhausted, from the fray, and made some sort of peace with their uncertainties; sometimes they have not been resolved at all. Many of these dramas are documented in a distinctively modern literary form, uniquely well-suited to exploring characters’ inner turmoil: the novel. Religious anxieties burn through the works of nineteenth-century novelists like James Hogg, George Eliot, or, again, Dostoevsky. Listen to the mother in *The Brothers Karamazov* who cannot control her doubts about immortality:

“I think, all my life I’ve believed, and then I die, and suddenly there’s nothing. ... What, what will give me back my faith? ... How can it be proved, how can one be convinced? Oh, miserable me! ... I’m the only one who can’t bear it. It’s devastating, devastating!”⁷

Some achieve unbelief. Some have it thrust upon them.

But as we saw last time, those who suffer these agonies are not merely passive. Very often they try to defend or re-found their faith, holding on to its core while relinquishing what seems unnecessary or indefensible. This can make it difficult to distinguish between religion's defenders and its adversaries. Spinoza is not the only iconic figure in the history of unbelief who was, at least in his own terms, a believer. In a terrific book a couple of years back, the historian Dominic Erdozain argued convincingly that a whole series of supposedly sceptical philosophers were in fact trying to purify Christianity, not to destroy it. Voltaire echoed Spinoza by rejecting miracles on the grounds that 'the universal theologian, that is, the true philosopher, sees that it is contradictory for nature to act on particular or single views': that is a religious, not an atheistic conviction. Tom Paine's reason for attacking Christianity in *The Age of Reason* was 'lest in the general wreck of superstition, of false systems of government and false theology, we lose sight of morality, of humanity and of the theology that is true'.⁸

These thinkers had not rejected Christianity, nor were they unwilling to deal in its currency. Instead, they were persuaded that that currency was devalued, and that the guarantees of the churches that claimed to stand behind it might no longer be sound. And as any banker knows, anxieties of that kind are intolerable, whether well-founded or not. Rather than trying to shore up faith in the old guarantors, these speculators attempted a bolder gambit: to rebase their religious currency entirely, founding it on the gold standard of natural law and morality rather than the churches' dubious claims to authority. They believed that in doing so they were going back to Christianity's true heart.

The trouble is, some of the results of this rebasing did not look very much like traditional Christianity. The Enlightenment era's greatest philosopher, Immanuel Kant, was a convinced adherent of the new gold standard. His 'categorical imperative', which codified it, still underpins what much of the modern world thinks is self-evident moral common sense. Kant believed himself to be defending God, but as Erdozain puts it, in fact 'Kant built a fortress of conscience ... that swore a rescued God to silence', and so created a system in which 'morality has swallowed religion'. Even Ludwig Feuerbach, one of the nineteenth century's bitterest moral critics of religion, belongs in this tradition, as the title of his 1841 diatribe *The Essence of Christianity* shows: by now, Christianity has eaten itself.⁹

The culmination of this is in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, when the idealistic Ivan lays out his very distinctive form of unbelief. At first glance it looks like the classic argument from suffering: God could not permit suffering, but suffering exists, therefore there is no God. But this is not Ivan Karamazov's argument. He does not deny God. He even accepts that in the end a higher good may come of suffering. His problem is simply that his moral intuition gags at the idea:

"If the suffering of children goes to make up the sum of suffering needed to buy truth, then I assert beforehand that the whole of truth is not worth such a price. ... Imagine that you yourself are building the edifice of human destiny with the object of making people happy in the finale, of giving them peace and rest at last, but for that you must inevitably and unavoidably torture just one tiny creature, that same child who was beating her chest with her little fist, and raise your edifice on the foundation of her unrequited tears – would you agree to be the architect on such conditions?"

This is not unbelief; it is defiance. His brother Alyosha murmurs that it is 'rebellion'. Ivan himself says, 'It is not that I don't accept God, Alyosha, I just most respectfully return him the ticket'. He finds the universe ethically unacceptable. The God who made it this way is real enough, but Ivan wants nothing to do with him.¹⁰

And yet, the gold standard by which Ivan and all these other moralists were measuring their religion was Christian. Ivan himself could not have made it plainer. Having declared his wish to return his ticket, he launches into his parable of the Grand Inquisitor, in which an inquisitor, who we are explicitly told does not believe in God, berates an incognito Jesus at great length for the foolish impracticality of his morals before condemning him to die. Jesus remains silent throughout, but at the end 'approaches the old man in silence and gently kisses him. ... That is the whole answer'.¹¹ Ivan is not clinging to Jesus' moral authority while rejecting churches and doctrines. He is rejecting churches and doctrines because of, and by means of, Jesus' moral authority.

Dostoevsky may have given us the most memorable image of this clash between Jesus and religion, but it was hardly original to him. We ended last time by noticing Spinoza's extravagant praise for Jesus, and in doing that he set a trend: unbelievers singling Jesus out for praise. Voltaire treated Jesus with uncharacteristic reverence, as an archetype of true natural religion. Thomas Jefferson claimed to follow what he called 'the Philosophy of Jesus', saying that Jesus would not recognise a single feature of the so-called Christianity erected in his name. Tom Paine believed not only that 'the morality [Jesus] preached and practised was of the most benevolent kind,' but that 'it has not been exceeded by any'. These sceptics may not revere him as the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity, but they plainly see him as unique. John Stuart Mill, the robustly atheist father of nineteenth-century liberalism, believed that 'the authentic sayings of Jesus of Nazareth' were not merely in 'harmony with the intellect and feelings of every good man or woman', but almost constituted true humanity:

"That they should be forgotten, or cease to be operative on the human conscience, while human beings remain cultivated or civilized, may be pronounced, once for all, impossible."¹²

Maybe some of these sentiments were insincere. If so, they were bowing to a cultural fact: for believers and unbelievers alike, Jesus Christ was by far the most potent moral figure in western culture. Radicals might question his divinity, but only a scoundrel like Nietzsche would question his morality. One raw index of this cultural power was the English fashion for literary 'lives' of Jesus started by John Seeley's *Ecce Homo* in 1865. Over the next forty years a staggering five thousand such 'lives' were published.¹³ If the Victorian age was losing faith in Christianity, it was certainly not losing interest in Christ.

One backhanded testimony to Jesus' cultural power is the persistence amongst a certain combative strain of atheism of a very odd belief: that Jesus of Nazareth never existed. Historically speaking, this claim is not impossible, but it is pretty implausible: in effect, it requires the existence of a large-scale, entirely successful and oddly pointless conspiracy in the first century. But it is not and never has been intended as a sober historical claim. Napoleon, who is recorded as denying Jesus' existence on several occasions, was not a scholar of ancient history. He simply had one of the modern era's most colossal egos, and resented kowtowing to the moral authority of a dead Galilean peasant. The case was made more substantially by Karl Marx's scholarly mentor Bruno Bauer. Bauer, perhaps the most serious historian ever to deny Jesus' existence, did because it fitted with his longstanding anti-Christian views, and also with his antisemitism, which balked at putting a Jewish prophet at the heart of western civilisation. In our own times, Jesus-denialism has found a more harmless home on the fringes of atheist subcultures. Books such as Kenneth Humphreys' *Jesus Never Existed* (2005) or Joseph Atwill's *Caesar's Messiah* (2005) do not disguise the fact that they are anti-religious polemics or simple contrarianism, not sober historical studies.¹⁴ What makes the determined pursuit of this argument interesting is that it is not only implausible: it is logically unnecessary. Denials of Christianity do not become weaker if you admit that Jesus of Nazareth existed, any more than denials of life on Mars become weaker if you admit that Mars exists. This fringe is following Napoleon by recognising that Christianity's cultural power depends less on philosophical or theological claims than on Jesus' moral authority. Atheism's more level-headed advocates have preferred to avoid engaging with Jesus at all. An unusual exception is the novelist Philip Pullman, whose 2010 book *The Good Man Jesus and the Rascal Christ* is an engaging fictionalised separation of the good, ethical Jesus from his bad, religious alter ego. Spinoza would have recognised the distinction. So even in our own times the moral authority of Jesus of Nazareth is a force to be reckoned with. Rather than critiquing or relativizing those morals, Christianity's opponents generally feel obliged to avoid him, to co-opt him by claiming his ethical mantle, or in extremis, to abolish him.

So, the western world's wrestling-match between belief and unbelief has been a long one. Both parties have made numerous premature declarations of victory or of defeat, but the struggle's course has repeatedly proved unpredictable. There is no knowing how things will turn next. Even so, since the mid-twentieth century, something has changed in Europe and North America. 'Religion,' said an authoritative commentator on the United States in 1955, 'has become part of the ethos of American life to such a degree that overt anti-religion is all but inconceivable.' Western society in the 1950s was certainly very secular, as Christian commentators lamented, but Christianity continued to define its moral frameworks. And so virtually everyone continued to claim a residual, nominal identity as a Christian, apart from the few who had ancestral ties to Judaism or another religion. Plainly, in the last half-century, that default, universal religious identity has broken down. For the first time, substantial and fast-growing minorities who deny that they have any religion at all have appeared: even in the United States, this is true of over a third of adults born since 1980.¹⁵ The minority of earnest and devout

Christians may or may not be shrinking – the picture varies from place to place, and certainly in the United States this group remains large and assertive – but the mass of nominal believers who have formed the majority in most historically Christian societies for over a century are rapidly shedding their skin. The change is above all a generational one. It seems increasingly plain that the 1960s were an inflection point, when a new kind of secularism appeared in western culture.¹⁶ Why?

I think that the perspective these lectures have taken suggest some answers. For a start, it is worth noticing what has *not* caused this secular surge. Angry unbelief has repeatedly over the past few centuries tried to confront or suppress religion, without much success. The first avowedly anti-Christian movement of modern times, in the French Revolution, served simply to stoke some of the Revolution's staunchest opposition. In the end Napoleon came to terms with the church whose founder he claimed had not existed. Twentieth-century Communist regimes have pursued official atheism, with at best mixed success, and in some cases, like Poland or China, quite the opposite. Even in open societies, campaigning, strident atheism has been no more obviously successful than campaigning, strident movements for religious renewal. In 1925, a group of combative New York atheists founded the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, with the aim of mounting what they called a 'direct frontal assault' on religion. It generated a good deal of excitement and a number of local chapters, but the 'assault' did not result in any kind of breakthrough. Within a decade it had ceased to function. Like the so-called 'village atheists' whose mulish nonconformity outraged nineteenth-century America; like the rakish 'Hellfire Clubs' which so offended moralists in eighteenth-century England; like the libertines who supposedly thronged sixteenth-century Paris; and like the steady stream of blasphemers who passed through medieval church courts, these people were shocking but not threatening. They were a part of the moral equilibrium of a Christian society.¹⁷ Christianity has endured a good many 'direct frontal assaults' in the past few centuries. They have not proved very effective. If anything, the period since the 1950s has been distinguished by the *absence* of substantial, coordinated anti-religious campaigns.

Nor does the post-1960s secular turn reflect any kind of contemporaneous collapse in the intellectual case for religion. Most modern atheists are happy to present themselves as heirs to the Enlightenment critique of religion, or of the nineteenth century's debates about science. Not much about this case is substantially new, aside from a psychological and neurological dimension. If anything, we need to recognise that the materialist argument against Christianity has weakened over the past century. A century ago, an educated lay person in Europe or North America might have been expected to believe that the universe is infinitely old and entirely deterministic; that humanity's 'races' are fundamentally different from one another; that the process of evolution is governed by some sort of progressive life-force; that the New Testament is a collection of myths created some centuries after the events it claims to describe, and the Old a mere collage of stories shared by peoples across the entire ancient Near East. All of those beliefs were the conventional wisdom of the age, all of them are inimical to traditional Christianity, and none of them have stood the test of time.¹⁸ If Christianity has disintegrated intellectually, it happened a long time ago, not in the 1960s.

So, if religion has neither collapsed nor been crushed, what has happened? Historians of the 1960s describe a series of tectonic social changes: individualism, feminism, pluralism, and so forth. But the most recent study by one of the most trenchant of these historians goes further. Callum Brown's remarkable 2017 book *Becoming Atheist* is an oral history of modern unbelief, based on interviews with eighty-five adult atheists across Europe and North America. It is impossible to read his account and deny that religiosity in the western world has undergone an epochal shift during his interviewees' lifetimes.

His interviewees' accounts are as varied as the people themselves. But Brown observes that they share a remarkably consistent *ethical* code. That code has two key elements. First is the so-called 'golden rule' of treating others as you would like to be treated – a Christian imperative, but not, as Brown points out, an exclusively Christian one. Then there is a linked set of principles about human equality and bodily and sexual autonomy. Brown calls this ethical framework 'humanism'. He tells us that this was a term which relatively few of his interviewees volunteered, but which all of them were happy to embrace when he offered them the chance.¹⁹

What makes this interesting is that Brown's interviewees claimed "without exception, that they were 'humanists' before they discovered the term. Humanism was neither a philosophy nor an ideology that they had learned or

read about and then adopted. There was no act of conversion, no training or induction. ... A humanist condition precedes being a self-conscious humanist.”²⁰

This ‘humanism’ was not a manifesto they had embraced, much less a programme imposed on them. Those of them who had grown up in religious settings had embraced this ethic before they broke with their religion. When the breaking point did come, it was either because of a conflict between their religious and their humanist ethics, or because their humanist ethics made their religion appear redundant. The implication is that, in the West since the mid-twentieth century, growing numbers of once-religious people have adopted an ethic which was independent of their religion, and which was in some tension with it: so they either drifted away from or consciously rejected their religion. This account, centred on ethics, meshes with the story we have been tracing since the seventeenth century.

The question then is, where did this ubiquitous ethic come from? If Brown’s humanists did not even consciously adopt their ethics, how did they reach such a consistently shared position? Brown – a proud humanist himself – suggests that it may arise from ‘within human experience’, indeed that ‘reason alone may construct humanism’: that this is a default, universal, human set of values. I can see that that is an appealing idea.

Unfortunately, it is nonsense. Modern humanism is in no sense an expression of universally shared human values. Its ethical markers – gender and racial equality, sexual freedom, a strong doctrine of individual human rights, a sharp distinction between the human and non-human realms – are, in a long historical perspective, very unusual indeed. Nor do they stand on a very firm logical base. Anyone who has ever tried philosophically to prove that there is such a thing as human rights, rather than simply asserting it, knows this. The fact that those ethical values appear intuitively obvious to Brown, as indeed they do to me, is not an answer. It is the problem.²¹

Brown does, however, observe that the dominance of these values in western culture can be dated to 1945, and in particular to ‘the notion of human rights which emerged from the Second World War’.²² I think this is the vital clue. The Second World War and in particular the Nazi genocide was the defining moral event of our age, which reset our culture’s notions of good and evil. By the early twentieth century, Christianity’s only undisputed role in Western society, its *raison d’être*, was to define morality. This is precisely what it failed to do in the Second World War, the modern era’s most intense moral test. It failed not only in the sense that many churches and Christians were to a degree complicit with Nazism and fascism, but in the wider sense that the global crisis revealed that Christianity’s moral priorities were wrong. It now seemed plain that cruelty, discrimination and murder were evil in a way that fornication, blasphemy and impiety were not.

As the post-war generations digested these lessons, they turned the war into the Western world’s foundation myth. Cultural conservatives sometimes worry that modern Western societies lack shared sacred narratives, but this is not exactly true. In the same way that Victorian publishers endlessly retold the life of Jesus, post-war films, novels and other media endlessly retold and retell the Second World War. It is the story we keep returning to. Have you ever heard any snatch of audio recording repeated more often than Chamberlain’s broadcast on 3 September 1939 announcing the beginning of the war? The phrases of Churchill’s speeches have sunk into our memories and grip us like words of scripture. The struggle against Nazism is the final reference point for every moral or political argument. Its history retains an unparalleled grip on our imagination because it is our *Paradise Lost*: our age’s defining battle with evil.

Once the most potent moral figure in western culture was Jesus Christ. Believer or unbeliever, you took your ethical bearings from him, or professed to. To question his morals was to expose yourself as a monster. Now, the most potent moral figure in western culture is Adolf Hitler. It is as monstrous to praise him as it would once have been to disparage Jesus. He has become the fixed reference point by which we define evil. Ken Livingstone might have thought that after a lifetime of courting controversy there was nothing he could say that would damage him: but it turned out there was one thing. The humanist ethic which Brown summarises is almost a precisely inverted image of Nazism. In the seventeenth century, arguments tended to end with someone calling someone else ‘atheist’, marking the point at which the discussion hit a brick wall. In our own times, as Godwin’s Law notes, the final, absolute and conversation-ending insult is to call someone a Nazi. That’s not an accident or a sign of intellectual laziness. It’s because Nazism is an absolute standard: it is where *argument* ends, because whether it is good or evil is not up for debate. Or again, while Christian imagery, crosses and crucifixes, have

lost much of their potency in our culture, there is no visual image which now packs as visceral an emotional punch as a swastika.

The plainest evidence that Nazism has crossed the barrier separating historical events from timeless truths is the way it has permeated the modern age's most popular myths. To many people it is incongruous, even embarrassing, that the twentieth century's bestselling work of fiction is an excessively long, unapologetically archaic and sometimes self-indulgent fairy-tale written by a philologist who was a very traditional Catholic, and whose most devoted readers were and remain teenage boys. But even if you share the now-receding literary disdain for J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, there is no gainsaying its cultural importance. Tolkien himself had no patience for allegory as a literary form, and vigorously denied that he had written one, but if his War of the Ring does not mirror the Second World War which was raging as he wrote the book, it certainly refracts it. Tolkien was an early and staunch opponent of Nazism in general and Nazi racial ideology in particular, in part because he felt the Nazi appropriation of his beloved Nordic mythology as a personal affront. But while he never doubted the righteousness of the Allies' cause, he was also a veteran of the Battle of the Somme, and knew that this war was, like any war, 'an ultimately evil job': so he told his son in 1944. And he used his own developing myth to explain what he meant: not only that there were 'a great many Orcs on our side', but that 'we are attempting to conquer Sauron with the Ring'. Such a war might end in victory, but a victory whose effect would be 'to breed new Saurons'.²³

Whatever we make of that as a political judgement, as a cultural prophecy it has proved uncannily prescient. Western culture has been breeding new Saurons ever since. The figure of the Dark Lord has stalked through the most persistent and popular mythologies of the post-war era, from *Star Wars*' Darth Vader to Harry Potter's Lord Voldemort. The debt these ersatz Hitlers owe to their real-world archetype is sometimes implied, sometimes openly acknowledged, but always plain. These are the myths on which generations of children in the post-Christian West have been raised, transposing the brutal lesson of the Second World War into timeless morality tales. It is a lesson our culture seems determined to teach itself and eager repeatedly to re-learn; that this is what true evil looks like, even though in reality evil rarely appears in such unambiguous dress. And while the Christian ethical sensibility which Tolkien embodied still underpins these myths, they have, like the culture in which they have thrived, left that original taproot behind them.

And this is where the emotional history of unbelief currently stands in what used to be Christendom. Perhaps we still believe that God is good, but we believe with more fervour and conviction that Nazism is evil. In post-war humanism, the centuries-old Christian moral revolt against Christianity has finally kicked over the traces and renounced its residual connection to Christian ethics. Or at least, it has tried to. Since this humanism has emerged by processes of intuition rather than of conscious reasoning – since its history is, inevitably, an emotional history – it cannot rid itself of its ancestry quite so easily. It has become almost commonplace to point out that humanism continues to be shaped by Christian ethical norms. In this sense, the old struggle between belief and unbelief is not over. It has simply entered a new phase.

Still, a new phase it is. Breaking our moral currency's last links to the old gold standard of Christian ethics is unprecedented. Perhaps gold standards are in the end no more rational than any other coin but underwriting our moral currency with the anti-Nazi narrative instead of with Christianity is an experiment. It is not clear how well or how long that narrative will be able to bear the burden it has been asked to carry. If we are going to choose a historical reference point for absolute evil, then Nazism is certainly hard to beat; but as the Second World War falls off the edge of living memory, will the old stories and convictions retain their power? Are moral myths we have distilled from them, heady as they are, capable of nourishing an enduring ethical sensibility? Will the lessons we have learned from them continue to seem intuitively and self-evidently true? The stirrings of authoritarian nationalism around the world suggest not. The readiness of some of those nationalists to make and claim pop-culture myths for themselves is a warning that emotive mythmaking is a game all sides can play. If the common coin of our shared morals comes into increasing question, with contested histories and myths being reduced to scraps of paper, we will have little to underpin our collective ethics except intuition – unless another shared experience, with luck one less terrible than the Second World War, provides renewed values against which our currency can be rebased.

Two things, I think, are clear. First, western Christendom is not about to snap back into place. The contemporary humanist surge is not a blip or an anomaly. It is a continuation of moral forces that have been at work within the Christian world for centuries. Believers hoping it will just go away are deluding themselves. Indeed, they are in some danger of being tempted by authoritarian nationalist voices that want to unlearn the Second World War's moral lessons, and to prioritise group identities over ethics. The way some central European politicians are using the term 'Christian' to justify rejecting Muslim refugees is a case in point. That kind of thing is not merely ethically backward, it is self-defeating. Western culture sloughed off this kind of seductive, compromised religion for a reason, and would if necessary, probably do so again. In the meantime, religions that dig their heels in to oppose the new moral environment risk taking on the role of medieval blasphemers: to validate a majority culture by offering it exactly the kind of predictable opposition it craves. The religions that will prosper in this environment will be those that work with the grain of humanist ethics, while finding ways to offer something that humanism cannot.

But one other thing is also clear: the humanist surge is not a stable new reality either. The intuitions which make it possible will not flow peacefully, steadily and indefinitely. Our cultures' moral frameworks have shifted before and they will do so again. Our beliefs will follow. Believers and unbelievers alike share an interest in how that story ends.

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¹ Martin Mulrow, *Enlightenment Underground: Radical Germany, 1680-1720*, trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), pp. 79-82; Manfred P. Fleischer, "'Are Women Human?'" The Debate of 1595 between Valens Acidalius and Simon Gedicus' in *Sixteenth Century Journal* 12/2 (1981), 107-120.

² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Penguin, 2017), I.ii.4.

³ Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, p. 146; Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Citadel Press: Secaucus, NJ, 1974), p. 50.

⁴ Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, pp. 184-6.

⁵ Paine, *Age of Reason*, 60; Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Transworld, 2016), p. 51; Hugh McLeod, *Secularisation in Western Europe, 1848-1914* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000), p. 162.

⁶ Bakunin, *God and the State*, pp. 25, 28.

⁷ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, I.ii.4.

⁸ Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, esp. pp. 130-1, 155; Paine, *Age of Reason*, p. 50.

⁹ Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, esp. pp. 120, 228.

¹⁰ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, II.v. 4.

¹¹ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, II.v. 5.

¹² Erdozain, *The Soul of Doubt*, p. 163; <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-09-02-0216>; Paine, *Age of Reason*, p. 54; John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, ed. Lou Matz (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2009), p. 123.

¹³ Gerald Parsons, 'Biblical Criticism in Victorian Britain: From Controversy to Acceptance?' in his *Religion in Victorian Britain vol. II: Controversies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 245-255.

¹⁴ For the tenor of this argument, Humphreys' website, <http://www.jesusneverexisted.com/>, is instructive.

¹⁵ Will Herberg, *Protestant – Catholic – Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 276; Michael Sherman, 'The Number of Americans with No Religious Affiliation Is Rising', *Scientific American* (2018):

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-number-of-americans-with-no-religious-affiliation-is-rising/>; and see above, p. XX.

¹⁶ Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁷ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), esp. pp. 249, 253.

¹⁸ Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: The Radicals who Made the Modern World* (London: William Collins, 2017), p. 264.

¹⁹ Callum Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 171-2.

²⁰ Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, p. 162.

²¹ Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, p. 174.

²² Brown, *Becoming Atheist*, pp. 162, 168.

²³ *Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 78.