

The Voice of Faith and the Challenge of Reason in National and International Politics

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When I wrote to tell Rai Gaita that I could accept his invitation to this conference I received a warm note saying, “I’m very glad, I was beginning to feel lonely amongst all these religious people”. I had to reply immediately that I hoped I wouldn’t disappoint him, for I don’t consider myself secular, though I am not traditionally religious either. My most recent book, *Moral Clarity*, talks quite a lot about religion, but although I discussed there my own intellectual doubts and developments in other matters I deliberately avoided the question: so do you believe, or not, and if so, in what? I don’t want to seem coy here, so I will put my cards on the table: call me a Kantian Jew in the mighty tradition of Hermann Cohen, Ernst Cassirer, and Hannah Arendt. One of my favorite lines from Arendt occurs in a letter she wrote to Jaspers, in which she said that although she couldn’t explain it, “I feel a childish trust in God. Of course one can’t do anything with that except be glad of it.” By “do anything with that” I take it she means: do anything politically, in the public sphere, and as I will argue, even in the moral one. I waver. I once wrote a book exploring all the arguments to be had against the idea of Providence, and still I have days when I see its hand. I think it would be fatal to decide in favor of one pull or the other: in the first case, fatal for hope, in the second, fatal for compassion. We need to keep both these impulses in balance without deciding definitively for one – as good Kantians should know.

But the reason I wrote the last book without stating my personal relationship to faith is that in that book I argued, among other things, that it makes little sense to divide the world along religious and secular lines. In this talk I will summarize the arguments that I made at more length there. Many rationalist religious thinkers have more in common with secular Social Democrats than with fellow believers; many a fundamentalist is closer to post-modern nihilism than she knows. Belief in a worldview because it’s absurd makes equal sense for both. Far less important than your belief that God exists, or that He doesn’t, is what you think your belief entails. Does it direct your behavior by rules and commandments that are set out before you, or does it require you to think them through yourself? Does it require you to try to make sense of the world, or does it give up on sense itself?

I like to illustrate this with a story from the Bible that you probably don’t know as well as you think you do: the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. They usually stand for simple cases of crime and punishment: The Sodomites sin and God destroys them, turning a thriving town into a pile of rubble and a woman into a pillar of salt for a wistful backward glance. For fundamentalists, the sin is

sexual license in general, homosexuality in particular, making both into abominations that threaten community survival. For gay people, the towns' destruction is an example of the injustice of traditional religion. For the Marquis de Sade, the story was an invitation to imagine the kind of violence that stands law on its head. And in fact, Sade knew the Bible better than most contemporary readers.

The story may be clear, but it's marvelously complex. To begin with, you needn't be a fundamentalist to abhor the sin that does in the Sodomites: It isn't fornication or homosexuality, but the local demand to drag out and gang rape two strangers whom the good-hearted Lot had offered to shelter. Ancient Mediterranean convictions about what hosts and guests owe each other formed the basis of traditional morality, and violations threatened social bonds at their core. The Greeks thought such violations reason enough to start the Trojan War. Lot takes his duties as host so seriously that he offers the raging mob his virgin daughters if they'll leave his guests alone. The guests turn out to be angels, who blind the Sodomites storming the door and prove their undoing. But whether or not you believe in angels or ancient rules of hospitality, you're likely to find the Sodomites' transgressions beyond every pale.

Some versions expand on the account in Genesis, as if gang raping your guests were not quite enough to merit annihilation: they suggest that the Sodomites were not simply immoral, but deliberately anti-moral. According to one Jewish tale from the Midrash, gang rape of strangers wasn't an accidental occurrence, but prescribed by Sodom's laws. According to another, helping strangers was punishable by death—a fate suffered by one of Lot's daughters, who was burned on a pyre for giving bread to a poor man, and by another nameless maiden who was smeared with honey and left on a bee-swarmed rooftop for doing the same. Even its taxes were perversely regressive: Owners of two oxen were liable for one day's civic service, while those with one ox were assessed for two. Sodom's crimes were all the worse for being thankless, for the city was showered with wealth. Yet blessed with such abundance, the Sodomites only dread that they might have to share it. One source says Sodom killed all its birds lest they take even a peck at the grain. Where kindness to strangers forms the framework of civilisation, what the Sodomites do is a double outrage. Many places ignore moral law; Sodom turns it upside down.

The most important part of the story, however, is what happens before the cities' destruction. Having called Abraham into His confidence and promised to make him mighty, God reveals His plan to destroy the cities. Abraham's reaction is awesome. Until then, he received God's word without question; he left his home and all he had, followed every commandment. Now he pauses and speaks up. What if there are fifty innocent people among the sinners? The judge of all the earth cannot be so unjust as to let innocent and guilty suffer alike! The judge of all the earth agrees; if there are fifty righteous people in

Sodom He will leave the city alone. But surely the Lord is not a pedant. What if the number turns out to be smaller? Would He destroy the whole city for lack of a mere five? The answer is readily forthcoming: The Lord will save Sodom if forty-five righteous people can be found there. But the Lord cannot be arbitrary! What if there are only forty good people in the city? Abraham bargains God all the way down to ten, and the number isn't an accident. It's easy enough for a handful to flee a burning city, which is just what turns out to happen. Though Lot tries to warn them, even some of his family refuse to listen, so he gathers the others and runs.

Three things about Abraham's action stir hearts like mine. One is his resolute universalism. Abraham's concern for the innocents of Sodom is not concern for his friends or his neighbors; it's concern for innocents everywhere. The people of Sodom are abstract and nameless and still worth the risk of his life. Another is his resoluteness, period. In his concern for innocent life he endangers his own. This is not, after all, a democracy, but a world in which kings are ill inclined to let subjects rebuke them. Abraham dares to remind the King of Kings that He's about to trespass on moral law. The text makes plain that Abraham is scared. His words are neither proud nor wheedling, but the plea of a servant to a master who could extinguish him with a glance. The third striking point to this story is its attention to detail. Moral judgment is not a matter of decisions made once and for all, but of keeping your eye on distinctions. Numbers matter. Gradations matter. Abraham's tone may be that of a merchant, but his mind is the mind of a moralist. If he can make God stop and think about small differences, none of us is ever exempt. Moral judgments are slow, specific, and seldom absolute. Yet two things in the biblical story emerge perfectly clear: Rape is a criminal action – and so is collateral damage.

We have moral needs, needs so strong they can override our instincts for self-protection, as the story of Abraham shows. It also shows those needs are not based in religion, or any form of divine command. They include the need to express reverence and the need to express outrage, the need to reject euphemism and cant and to call things by their proper names. They include the need to see our own lives as stories with meaning – meanings we impose on the world, a crucial source of human dignity – without which we hold our lives to be worthless. Most basically and surprisingly, we need to see the world in moral terms. These needs are grounded in a structure of reason. Moral inquiry and political activism start where reasons are missing. When righteous people suffer and wicked people flourish, we begin to ask why. Demands for moral clarity ring long, loud bells because it is something we are right to seek. Those who cannot find it are likely to settle for the far more dangerous simplicity, or purity, instead.

I like this story for many reasons, but two stand out in particular: first, it warns fanatical believers that they too must think for themselves. Abraham had a more direct connection to the Lord than any of us can ever hope for, and still he could not depend on God to tell him what was right. Secondly, it's a way of

reminding fanatical atheists that believers are not, or not always, blind followers of religious commandments, but often think as clearly and courageously as anyone else.

But the most important part of the story, for me, is that it answers the question: is morality driven by faith? Many people, religious and secular, assume that it is. The belief is so common that Abraham's stand at Sodom attracts very little attention. His plea for the unknown Sodomites is far less familiar than his silence before the Lord's command to kill his own son. The binding of Isaac sustains orthodoxies of every kind. When a voice calls you to take your son, your only son whom you love, and journey to a distant height that will be indicated later, you saddle up your ass and do it, secure in the faith that the Lord will solve whatever problems arise on the way. For Christians, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son foreshadows God's willingness to sacrifice His. For Muslims, that willingness is so fundamental that Ishmael, the forebear of Islam, rather than Isaac, is portrayed as the intended victim. Medieval Jews facing murderous crusaders took courage from the story and slaughtered themselves and their children to escape forced conversion. However long Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians struggle to find multiple meanings in the text, the dominant one is this: Abraham's unquestioning readiness to heed God's command to sacrifice the thing he loves most is the act that qualifies him to father what are still called the Abrahamic faiths.

Now I have no qualms about being partisan. The Abraham who risked God's wrath to argue for the lives of unknown innocents is the kind of man who would face down injustice anywhere. He is deeply human in the best of all senses, afraid and imperfect, but neither his fear nor his frailty stand in the way of his own reason. He is reverent but not deferential, for his faith is based on his moral backbone, not the other way around. He is, in short, what I call an Enlightenment hero. As Kierkegaard taught us, the Abraham who takes his son to Mount Moriah has left ethics and enlightenment behind. Kant's comment on that passage was no less unequivocal: Abraham should have reflected, and concluded that anyone who asked him to do that could not be God. You can tell which side he's on.

But I'd be cheating if I tried to argue that the Abraham of Sodom and Gomorrah is the most genuine one. The Old Testament itself is magnificently equivocal. And though religious thinkers will fight fiercely to show their standpoint to be the one that religion really sanctions, each religion has signposts pointing both ways. One insists on faith as submission, underscoring the need to obey laws whose reasons we need not understand. But while they may preach that the word of God is transparent, fundamentalists need interpretation as much as anyone else.

For instructions are rarely self-evident, and holy books are written in codes that must be deciphered like any others. This is not a matter of applying ancient principles that once were obvious to modern situations that are not. No law

applies itself, ever. Much of ancient scholarship itself began in the need to work out which moral judgments followed from which moral claims. Thus each of the three Western religious traditions has a rationalist strain, opposed to a fundamentalist one, stretching back to the ancient religious academies where the modern notion of scholarship was shaped. All this learning arose in devotion, from those engaged in the task of making daily sense of what followed from the texts they held sacred.

Far from viewing our capacity to reason as threatening our capacity to obey God, this tradition sees thinking as its very fulfillment. (Some Jewish parables show God laughing with pleasure when His children defeat Him with a particularly good argument.) If reason is God's gift, He meant us to use it, and on this tradition our ability to make sense of the world is just one more proof of God's goodness, and hence of His glory.

The two Abraham stories are pages apart in the Bible, and worlds apart in their message. One urges us to submit to God's orders; however outrageous they appear to be, they'll lead us right in the end. The other urges us to question, for even a message that comes in God's voice may need to be reconsidered. Both stories are deeply part of our repertoire, anchored firmly in the very first book of the Bible on which so many others depend. Even those who believe in biblical authority won't find it decisive here. They have to decide how the book should be read.

Any serious reading of it will raise the question: Are things good because God loves them, or does God love them because they're good? As readers of Plato will remember, this question isn't confined to monotheism. Socrates was executed for alleged impiety. His crime wasn't atheism – he really did worship the local gods – but insisting that reason be put before them. Goodness isn't arbitrary. Things must be good in themselves, which is what makes the gods love them; the gods' choice cannot make something good that is evil just because they are gods.

Both Abraham and Socrates offer another perspective. Whether the tradition is monotheist or pagan, it has central sources for denying that we need religious authority to maintain morality. The Abraham of Sodom and Gomorrah certainly didn't; it was he who risked his life to give God lessons in ethics – and this story comes at the start of monotheistic tradition. This gives lie to the claim that religion obviates the need for thinking, a claim often held by fundamentalists and atheists alike. For the fundamentalists Abraham's message is clear: however close you may be to the Lord's word, you are responsible for thinking it through on your own. For their opponents, the lesson is just as important, since hostility to religion often begins with the assumption that religion insists on moral immaturity, making secularism grown-up in a way no religion can ever be. The story of Sodom shows us that real ethics and real religion demand moral maturity. This is true because religion is an expression of morality – not, as so often assumed, the other way around. Any ethics that

depends on religious commandment is bad ethics; any religion that claims we can't behave without it is bad religion. Of course there are plenty of both around, a practical question that must be dealt with practically. But first we must see that neither genuine religious nor genuine moral impulses are ever expressed in standpoints that tie the two essentially together.

Those who view religion as necessary for morality reduce us to the moral level of four-year-olds. *If you follow these commandments you'll go to heaven, and if you don't you'll burn in hell* is just a spectacular version of the carrots and sticks with which we raise our children: If you clean up your room you'll get the cookie, and if you don't you'll stay inside. Serious believers, on the other hand, despise the sort of faith that springs up in foxholes. The religious feeling they cherish is not about a being who can be bribed: I'll do whatever you say if only you'll save me. They hold this attitude to be no better than that of a pagan who thinks the gods will protect him if only he serves up a particularly tasty bit of entrail. True faith, they think, is not a matter of bargaining, but of gratitude—certainly for creation, and possibly for salvation as well.

If you acknowledge that serious religion and serious ethics are thus separate matters, you must believe things are good or evil independent of divine authority.

If morality is settled neither by the claims of religion nor the claims of self-interest, must we believe there's an otherworldly standard of goodness, fixed and eternal in a transcendent world? Plato seemed to think so, and his metaphysics provided centuries of fuel for postmodernist fires. (Not all postmodernist claims are recent.) What was attacked was more fairy tale than Plato's own views; it's unlikely that he pictured ideas as ghostly objects in the heavens beaming down at the shadows below. Still, he did believe that things are good, or true, or beautiful because they participate in ideas far above and beyond them. This comes perilously close to the thought that morality must be commanded – if not by God then by nature; if not by nature then by a supernatural metaphysics with the features of both. This poses problems for anyone who rejects a particular source of commandment. Perhaps even more important: What about those who believe that being moral is not a matter of following orders, whether natural or supernatural, but about the dignity of freely choosing to do right?

Can we find a basis for a world-view that supports these claims? I'm not talking about a search for foundations. I believe most of the interesting things philosophy can say about that search were already said by Immanuel Kant, who argued that we cannot provide arguments from outside morality to show that morality is true: truth is about the way the world is, morality is about the way it ought to be. My most modest hope for the 21st century is that philosophers may get tired of the minor industry they've created to proving our concepts to be legitimate, and go about doing something more useful – at least talking about the concepts, and their uses and abuses, themselves.

My choice for acceptable world-views is the much-maligned Enlightenment. It's no accident that rejections of the Enlightenment result in premodern nostalgia or postmodern suspicion; where Enlightenment is at issue, modernity is at stake. A defense of the Enlightenment is a defense of the modern world, along with all its possibilities for self-criticism and transformation.

But the Enlightenment seems a strange place to look for a bridge between secular people and believers. The Enlightenment seemed never so happy as when attacking religion, whether it was the veneration of jewel-encrusted saints' bones or wafers that changed their substance, the vanity of the God of the Old Testament or the resurrection of the God of the New, the cruelty of Biblical heroes like David or of a doctrine that consigns babies to eternal torture. The Enlightenment's first target was church authority, in its day the basis of all political authority, bolstered with webs of superstition and absurdity waiting to be swept away. The Bible offered bawdy analogies for the taking; in Bayle's hands Abraham became a pimp, and David a serial killer. No one else in either Testament fared any better. Voltaire did his best to outdo his revered Bayle where he could. Here is his account of the difficulties a Jesuit would face if he tried to explain Christianity to the emperor of China.

The Emperor: I don't understand you. You have just told me that she was the mother of God. So God slept with his mother in order to be born of her?

Frere Rigolet: You've got it, your Sacred Majesty; grace was already in operation. You've got it, I say; God changed himself into a pigeon to give a child to a carpenter's wife, and that child was God himself.

The Emperor: But then we have two Gods to take into account: a carpenter and a pigeon.

Frere Rigolet: Without doubt, Sire; but there is also a third, who is the father of these two, and whom we always paint with a majestic beard; it was this God who ordered the pigeon to give a child to the carpenter's wife, from whom the God carpenter was born; but at bottom these three make only one. Now you see that the pigeon who proceeds, the carpenter who is born of the pigeon, and the father who has engendered the pigeon, can only be a single God; and that a man who doesn't believe this story should be burned in this world and in the other.

The Emperor: That is as clear as day.

When the riotous mockery was over there was plenty of room for outrage. Millions had lost their lives during wars of religion. Voltaire made several lists purporting to calculate the total of Christianity's victims, which he variously estimated at 9,718,800 and 9,468,800. Between the scorn and the rage it's easy to conclude that a war upon religion was not only the Enlightenment's point of departure, but the fire that drove its engine from the start. Both its friends and its foes were quick

to see the battle as one between God and His ministers on one side, and the rest of humankind on the other.

If the Enlightenment wished to hoist human dignity, exalt our natural faculties and liberate our capacities, it would do so at divine expense. If tradition wished to reply, it could do so only by humiliating humankind. If you want to protect the sacred you must mortify the human; if you are devoted to the human, you must reject the divine. Today most defenders of the Enlightenment believe that the divine and the human are fundamentally at war. We can lay down arms, hope for grace and forgiveness, or we can kill God and declare victory for humanism. The Enlightenment was out to reduce fear; religion seemed to feed on it. For however lofty it sounded, prayer was an exalted form of the rites used by any village heathen to ward off the evil eye.

For careless readers like Richard Dawkins, this is the Enlightenment tradition they are bravely carrying on. Anyone who reads more carefully will see that most Enlightenment attacks did not attack religion as such, but the ways that religions undermine their own stated goals. Religion meant to proclaim deepest truth thrives on contradiction and hypocrisy; faith meant to promote peace leads to slaughter and woe. If Christianity produced the opposite of what it intended, what could be expected from such an ill-conceived faith? If you want to produce virtue you must conceive of humans as beings who are capable of it. Miserable sinners produce miserable sins, and the prayer and ritual they are told to practice only makes matters worse. Though it was grist for his mill and he used it, even Hume – the one true atheist among the major thinkers claimed for the Enlightenment – seemed positively offended by a religion that saw its God as thriving on “the lowest of human passions: a restless appetite for applause”.

Reason’s light here was a moral one: a religion of justice should not promote bloodshed and cruelty, a religion of truth should not rest on superstition and lies, a religion of awe cannot cultivate traits that are foolish and vulgar. Traditional religion did violence not just to our nature but to God’s, leaving both without dignity. The God of the Bible doesn’t deserve to be God; He is too brutal, too vain, and too petty to meet our real notions of the divine. Note Voltaire’s plea: “May this great God who is listening to me, this God who can surely neither be born of a virgin, nor die on the gallows, nor be eaten in a piece of dough, nor have inspired these books filled with contradictions, madness and horror – may this God, Creator of all the worlds, have pity on this sect of Christians who blaspheme Him.” (Talk about the so-called new atheism: this is so much more fun than reading Dennett or Dawkins.)

This God was hardly less offensive than the Baal who demanded human sacrifice or the Cronus who ate his own children. What was needed, Voltaire held, was a purer religion than Christianity, as Christianity had been purer than those pagan rituals seem to us. Kant carried the argument all the way home. A genuinely religious standpoint views God to be so great He is beyond our grasp; thus we should not even speculate about His nature. This thought produced the only praise

which he (or most any Enlightenment philosopher) ever had for the Jews: by refusing to picture God, or even to use His name, Judaism preserved a sense of holiness that gives God His due.

What traditional religion did to God's nature, Enlightenment thinkers pointed out, was no worse than what it did to ours. If it projected our lowest instincts onto the divinity, it expected even less of us, with predictable results. (Call me a miserable sinner long enough, and don't be surprised what you get.) Many authors contrasted the brave and noble Romans with the cringing, apologetic creature Christianity was meant to foster. But when it came to worship, all had one thing in common: pagans and monotheists alike tried to move God with carrots, and expected him to move them with sticks. Each treated Him like a rather dim tyrant whom one bitterly resents but cannot live without. The only difference between pagan and monotheistic prayer lay in differing degrees of honesty. The pagan slaughters a bull and begs for the rains to come in their season, and the wheat and the corn in theirs. The monotheist devises a series of rituals to thank God for doing what it's hoped He'll continue to do.

The idea of a God who must be propitiated to help us when we're needy is a debased image of God, and makes us look even worse. If this is the divine image, both sides look pretty ugly. While portraying God as a vain and brutal tyrant, it turns us into small children or hapless criminals, kept in line with a series of laws we neither grasp nor respect. The Enlightenment was making an argument not about the truth or probability of religion, but something far more striking: traditional religion is immoral. This is an extraordinary reversal, for much of the eighteenth century was convinced of the opposite: without religion there would be no morality at all.

The claim that traditional religion was unethical was thus far more devastating than attacks on its veracity. The most extraordinary argument was offered by Kant. He asked you to imagine what would happen if you got the knowledge religion claims to give you: there is personal Providence at hands of a God who reads all the secrets of your heart all the time, and controls the laws of nature as He will. Now you know what you thought you wanted: virtue will always be rewarded with happiness, somewhere or other, and vice will be punished with hell. What does this certainty do to your soul? To begin with, it leads to self-righteousness. If you're certain that happiness and virtue are properly connected, you must believe your own good fortune to be due to your merit, and my bad fortune to be all my own fault. Self-satisfaction and arrogance inevitably result; even if you happened to deserve your good fortune beforehand you are likely to act in ways that ensure you don't deserve it afterwards. So knowledge of traditional religion produces smugness, if we're lucky, and Inquisitions, if we're not.

Kant's point goes even deeper. If we knew that acting morally led directly to happiness we would not only be self-righteous, we couldn't be righteous at all. Everything we did would be sheer calculation, strategically planned to make sure the boss hands out the rewards that we crave. Our behavior would doubtless

improve; few men would imitate Don Giovanni if they really thought they were headed for hell. But good behavior isn't the same thing as moral behavior. If you only act for the sake of rewards and punishments, are you any better, or freer, than a well-trained dog? Kant thought you were not. Moral actions must be free actions, and freedom turns out to depend on our limits: not knowing whether your moral actions will be rewarded is crucial to morality. Kant concludes his argument with a brilliant twist. We may have faith in Providence, but thank Heaven we have no knowledge. It's possible to detect a note of irony here, but even more a measure of awe. Providence, he says, is no less generous in what it denies us than in what it gives us. This is not the sort of humility that simply accepts our limited fate; Kant thinks we should rejoice in it. Keeping us guessing turns out to be essential not only to our humanity, but to God's greatness.

The second Enlightenment objection to traditional religion is even more surprising than the first. In picturing God without glory, humankind without honor, traditional religion was itself irreverent. Voltaire called the Christian image of God blasphemous; Kant thought it idolatrous. A God who could be bribed with behavior that was good for the sake of reward was no better than a god who could be bribed with the smoke of a sacrifice. Fanatics think they are avenging the Divine Majesty; in fact, Voltaire wrote, they are insulting it. Not because their God looks more like a Mafia boss than a God of justice; that's only a problem of ethics. The critique goes even further: on the accounts of traditional religion God is not only a gangster, but a bumbler. If He were omnipotent, wouldn't He create the best world possible? And in a world that works as it ought to, what need would there be for miracles? The problem with miracles was not, as Hume argued, that they cannot meet reliable standards of evidence. The very notion of a miracle was incompatible with our notion of majesty. If what God created was good in the beginning, why need He come back to fix it later on?

Such an argument could be underhanded; it's all a matter of tone. In fact, most of those using it were perfectly sincere. Here's the opening of Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary* on miracles: "A miracle, according to the real meaning of the word, is something admirable. Then everything is a miracle. The marvelous order of nature, the rotation of a hundred million globes around a million suns, the activity of light, the life of animals – these are perpetual miracles." Anyone who writes this way is less likely to reject religion than to look for another, and that's in fact what happened. The Enlightenment invented Deism, or what it more often called natural – sometimes rational – religion. The terms themselves were clever propaganda. Emphasising the link between reason and nature was a way of elevating both, and undermining their opponents. If Enlightenment religion was natural and reasonable, traditional religion must be both unnatural and mad.

Natural religion came in several versions, but this much was crucial to each of them: it offered religion stripped of doctrine down to common denominators based just on those truths that could be known by anyone, from Königsberg to Constantinople, who was willing to reason. They needed no revelation to believe in a good and wise Creator, and a Creation resonant with natural and moral order.

Thus instead of serving as a force to divide us, natural religion would unite. It offered the hope that agreement on doctrine could prevent the wars of religion that had devastated much of the seventeenth century, but it offered something more. Religion, they thought, had been mired in the foxhole, retained as the cry of desperate men. But reverence, not wretchedness, should be the source of true religion; not original sin, but our capacity to advance towards something resembling the image in which we were originally made, and which Christians believe God Himself chose to take shape in. Aren't these more rational, more natural, more religious forms of faith than the superstitious mumbo-jumbo being offered by the keepers of the faith?

Natural religion expressed the breath of wonder that the age of Enlightenment exhaled. All too often, myths of modern thought view the rise of science as a threat to religion, but no one saw it that way at the time. On the contrary. Every new discovery revealed a world of marvels, every scientific advance was a window on God's glory. The God of Ptolemaic cosmology was merely an amateur. How much greater was a God who could design a world with the simplicity and elegance of Newton's? Science came not to bury God, but to praise Him. The more we understand the order of universe, the better we can admire God's wisdom – and His benevolence in endowing us with the gift of reason with which to grasp all His majesty. The God of the philosophers wasn't a personal one. We worship Him not with an eye to boons He might grant in the future but to the ones we've been granted in the present. This type of worship does both sides honor. Who needs a God to intervene in the world when we have One who made everything as it should be from the beginning?

Here's an anecdote that exemplifies the Enlightenment attitude towards religion and reverence: Voltaire asked a visitor to join him in watching the sun rise near his home on the Swiss border. After a long climb, Voltaire took off his hat and prostrated himself before the glorious view. "I believe!" he exclaimed. "Powerful God, I believe!" Then he rose and told his guest, "As for monsieur the son and madame his mother, that's another story." Both the awed and the arch tone ring true. Voltaire is particularly important for my story, for if anyone embodies Enlightenment impiety, it is he. No one battled religion with as many different arms. He hated the Catholic Church with the passion only Jesuit schooling seems to inspire, and could be merciless in attacking any number of other religious institutions as well. But his reasons for doing so were neither irreverent nor indifferent; he rather held religion to ethical and religious standards, and found it sorely wanting.

So the Enlightenment not only denied that religion was necessary for morality; they held most forms of religion to be positively immoral as well as blasphemous. And yet something should be preserved that is expressed in Voltaire's cry in the Alps: Powerful God, I believe! The content of the belief, theologically speaking, is any one of a number of variations on a very thin claim: there is some wise and powerful force that created the marvelous universe we enjoy. If the content of the belief is scarcely complex, the form of worship is even simpler. Voltaire gives a good

picture of it in that chapter of *Candide* where the travellers reach the utopian El Dorado, and ask an old man if the country had any religion.

“The old man grew a bit red. – How’s that? he said. Can you have any doubt of it? Do you suppose we are altogether thankless scoundrels?... Candide wanted to know how the people of El Dorado prayed to God. – We don’t pray to Him at all, said the good and respectable sage. – We have nothing to ask Him for, since everything we need has already been granted; we thank God continually.”

And yet something about religion and ethics seems connected, even if you reject the old view as debased and debasing. You don’t need to hold that the fear of hellfire is all that stands between us and anarchy to hold that religion is somehow tied to moral life. It’s an assumption made by thoughtful believers and atheists alike. Even as serious an author as Steven Jay Gould argues that religion and science should be allowed to rule their separate spheres because we need religion “to define meaning in our lives and a moral basis for our actions.”

Abraham did not. His argument with God shows why Gould’s well-meaning attempt is deeply confused. Religion is not connected to morality as foundation; contrary to many assumptions it provides neither justification nor sanction. Then how are religion and morality connected? Why did Enlightenment thinkers who were willing to risk their livelihoods, and sometimes their lives, to challenge traditional religion, insist on maintaining ties to religion after all? What was really at stake?

The Enlightenment denied piety to make room for reverence. If piety is a matter of fear and trembling, reverence is a matter of awe and wonder. There is very little written on the concept of reverence, and no wonder: Reverence itself is virtually ineffable. It’s what gives rise to the feeling expressed by Wittgenstein: *Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent*. Reverence is what you feel when you feel overpowered, struck dumb by the realization that some things are beyond human grasp. Why should human language be able to contain it?

Music, if not silence, is its deepest expression, though not every piece of music will do. In 1977 the U.S. launched the Voyager spaceship bound for the stars with a message to whomever might eventually find it. But what message should be sent from the Earth as a whole? Like most committee decisions this one was a mish-mash. When those extraterrestrial beings of whom we know nothing decode the instructions for playing the gold-plated copper phonograph record that prefigured the CD-ROM, they will hear greetings in fifty-five languages and sounds including humpback whales, Peruvian wedding songs, and Chuck Berry. One member of the committee, having failed to convince his colleagues, later printed his dissenting proposal: "I would vote for Bach, all of Bach, streamed out into space, over and over again. We would be bragging, of course, but it is surely excusable for us to put the best possible face on at the beginning of such an acquaintance. We can tell the harder truths later."

Which truths, exactly? That we are rarely that beautiful, almost never sublime? That though most religious traditions place us in God's image, only a few of us ever approach it? All that, to be sure, and something more: few of us realise how short we fall, which means that not just great art but reverence itself is in limited supply. The very word is likely to produce misgivings, like New Age discussions that begin with the word spirituality. Even those of us with high tolerance for what others call kitsch may find the word too sweet or too tinny, something that's devalued the more often it's invoked. Traditional religion did it with poetry, but writing good poetry about particulars is comparatively easy. Once you abandon the guardrails of traditional faith, the force that was behind it veers off, inarticulate.

The wish to maintain a distinction between sacred and profane is not a recognition of mystery but of limit, with the profound understanding that Creation, wherever it comes from, isn't ours to dispose of. Natural religion's image of Creation was much clearer than its image of a Creator. Whatever else you believe about the world, only one thing is crucial: it wasn't you that made it. This points to one difference between reverence and respect. Respect is something you should feel for yourself along with others. Reverence is the feeling you have for something none of us will ever reach. You can have reverence for God or nature, but also for ideals of justice or beauty or truth. To be reverent is to be aware of the contrast between all the things that you aspire to and all that can bring you down: failure and weakness and madness and, should you somehow avoid all the others, death. Our reluctance to desecrate corpses is visceral, not utilitarian. It springs from a sense that cherishing life and feeling awe before death are too close to each other to take risks.

The attempt to tame reverence into doctrines and practices is as precarious as it is natural. One moving effort to shape reverence is the institution of the Sabbath. Jewish tradition understands the commandment remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy as a demand to show reverence for Creation. If God rested on the seventh day to contemplate the goodness of His work, we ought to follow Him by reminding ourselves that life itself is more important than all the business with which we usually fill it up. You needn't be a theist to agree to that statement; you're likely to find it self-evident, and probably banal. But it's just the simplest truths that are easiest to forget, and Jewish tradition sought a way to capture them. Reverence, like any feeling, cannot be commanded, but a series of laws were devised to mark off a space of time in which it could be encouraged. On Sabbath, human forms of creation are forbidden – whether baking a pie or running a warehouse or writing an essay – to recall all the better what humans cannot produce. Making love is expressly encouraged, along with good food and wine and company. Only what gets in the way of gratitude is proscribed. It's a marvelous recognition of human frailty: while we're apt to forget the truths that are most essential, simply intoning them gets sappy. Instead, a set of rituals was devised to structure your life so you might have a chance to feel it.

Yet reverence refuses to be captured, as anyone who has tried to do it will know.

Rituals become ritualised, and the structures that were meant to further reverence can also obstruct it. The Orthodox Jew who hit upon the idea of eluding the prohibition on using electricity by connecting automatic timers that would light his lamps after sundown was being pious, but it's hard to call him reverent. This is not an argument against ritual or ceremony; I think we need more of them. It is a note of skepticism about whether ritual, however brilliant, can fulfill its deepest goals.

Like anything that underscores the inadequacy of language, reverence is easier to approach by saying what it isn't. It has more than one opposite: scorn, disrespect, and most important, envy, one of the deadlier sins. Reverence is usually rare, and one of its elements is surprise. Like love, you cannot will it: if you don't feel reverence toward an object, pointing out its admirable qualities will not help - though without those qualities reverence is impossible. Like love, it overwhelms you, and if moments of love and lovemaking can be reverent, it's because you know you're in the grip of something vaster than you are. If reverence cannot be willed nor persuaded, it certainly cannot be forced. Perhaps most importantly, reverence belongs to things that cannot be bought or sold. Otherwise it becomes idolatry.

If reverence contains admiration it also contains gratitude. That's the impulse behind the argument for design, the idea that Creation is so miraculous there must have been a Creator behind it. Kant thought this was the only argument for God's existence that is tempting for both the scholar and the man on the street, even as he argued that it was fallacious. And the flaws in the argument didn't prevent Voltaire from feeling reverent in the face of an Alpine sunrise. What you feel in such a moment isn't the kind of gratitude you feel for a gift from a loved one, but closer to what you feel for an unexpected act of kindness from a passing stranger. That is gratitude for Being itself, and for the fact that you're alive to experience it. It's an experience not of pleasure, but of silent celebration. These are feelings that enlarge us, and make us better than before.

Enlightenment thinkers held ingratitude to be both the most hateful and most pervasive of human vices. Ingratitude may be wrong, but it's neither perverse nor accidental, for it is a reluctance to acknowledge your debts. You can't be truly grateful for an act of justice; what you feel is satisfaction when you get what you deserve. Gratitude is thankfulness for acts of goodness you do not. As such it requires you to acknowledge your dependency - the reason why Aristotle, who thought it unfitting for magnanimous men to receive as well as give, didn't like it. But Enlightenment thinkers opposed him. For Adam Smith, whose *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* analyzed the subject at some length, gratitude was both a natural passion and a vital civic virtue. Though Smith held self-interest to function as the framework of civil society, he thought gratitude was crucial in holding it together, for it interests us in the happiness and misery of others beyond ourselves. While these philosophers focused on gratitude toward other people, what makes it a moral emotion has nothing to do with reciprocity. (Otherwise, as cynics argued, it is nothing more than the thank-you note grudgingly written by the child who calculates it will bring him more of the same.) Real gratitude requires

acceptance of your limits: you are not entirely independent, but beholden – if only to the past. While emancipating itself from a world in which people's choices were virtually determined by past traditions, the Enlightenment was careful to acknowledge them. Though it encouraged the conditions that made the idea of fashioning yourself possible, it also recognised that you cannot do it alone. A century later, German sociologist Georg Simmel called gratitude “the moral memory of mankind.”

And this is a standpoint we need in the modern. Much of our vision of happiness is derived from the Enlightenment: the bold and restless striving to advance beyond what you've already been given. So is, properly understood, our conception of human reason: the refusal to accept the given as such. Reverence is the moment you are simply thankful for it. When you put them all together what you have is not a zero-sum game. You needn't mortify the human in order to feel reverence for what goes beyond it, nor scorn religion in order to dignify humanity. Whatever else the idea of God may be, or not be, it's above all the idea that human beings have limits – but to understand limits as fetters is to misunderstand what it means to be human. Kant conveyed what we need in the balance: “Two things fill the mind with awe and wonder the more often and more steadily we look upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” The first, he continued, strikes down our self-conceit. Any sky that's sufficiently clear to reveal enough stars will remind you of your place in a universe that dwarfs you. Yet the moral law you know you could follow if you were willing to stand up for justice lets you know how tall you can stand.

I've been arguing for a worldview in which reason and reverence are not at odds but in tandem. They work together like Kant's moral law and starry heavens – in order to be decent, we must keep one eye on each. In order to be decent: not because religion is the foundation of morality, though it can be a way of expressing it, but because reverence involves gratitude for Creation and awareness of our dependence on it. There are obvious reasons why we need reverence for Creation. One of the few hopeful things coming out of red state – that is, Republican-leaning – America is a movement of alliances between environmentalist groups and those Christian churches that regard human beings as nature's stewards. I could list some other things that reverence would be good for, but the very making of such a list would be paradoxical and self-defeating. Reverence cannot be defended on instrumental grounds. Even though it's good for us, that can't be the reason to feel it.

And this is just the point where we must acknowledge the force of fundamentalist claims. The fundamentalists in all three monotheistic religions are right to see something profound in a culture where reverence is utterly lacking. (What Western secular culture feels towards the market is something like idolatry, but the concept of reverence makes no sense there.) Indeed, the very notion of reverence makes us nervous. Of all the criticisms I received for my last book, the sharpest were from left-leaning secularists who objected to my insistence on retaining reverence. Reverence, they argued, was too close to religion, which is too close to fanaticism,

from which it is always a short step to religious violence. I suspect that in addition to fear of violence from the outside, what drives many of these critics is a deeper, less laudable fear: fear of embarrassment.

The other answer to such critics is simple: their suggestion doesn't work. However many books the new atheists may sell, they are reaching only the converted. And this is not because religious fundamentalists are deaf to the voice of reason, but because they also hear another. Max Weber used the phrase "religiously musical" though he described himself as tone deaf on that score. But even Weber declared, "I regard myself in this respect as a cripple, as a mutilated human being...I find a liberal theologian, though I may find him illogical and confused, humanly infinitely more valuable and interesting than the intellectual pharaseeism of the naturalists, that is so horribly typical, and in which there is so much less life than in the theologian."

One hundred years later, will anyone claim that our culture is less crippled? I don't need to list examples you can read in most any daily newspaper; I will mention that the one I read, the *International Herald Tribune*, regularly prints detailed, well-meaning articles describing, for example, the fact that people are increasingly driven to sell their own organs to provide food for their families – and prints those reports next to full-page ads displaying wristwatches or earrings that cost the equivalent of quite a few people's annual incomes taken together. Our children bathe in a culture that preaches economic self-interest as the single driving force of human action, and scorns appeals to anything else as delusion or fraud. Here and there, in our homes, we do what we can to inoculate them. But when they are barraged by forces as different as evolutionary psychology, on the one hand, and television shows that hold, and make millions by humiliating people for a few dollars or minutes of fame, how long can our children resist?

I refused to identify myself as religious or secular when I wrote about religion in the hope of appealing to both. My hope was to undercut the prejudices and condescension, whether spoken or silent, that each group usually feels towards the other, for I believe more things unite than divide us. So did Barack Obama, whose sweet voice of reason thought to overcome old divisions by appealing to common virtues. This is not the place to discuss all the forces that undermined many of the hopes the world shared for his first term, but even for those who don't follow U.S. Supreme Court decisions, it must be clear that the power of the market is so strong it now drowns reason out. And that, after all, is at the base of so many fundamentalist critiques. They may seem as silly as Orthodox Jews demonstrating against the internet, as threatening as Salafists who want to ban pictures of bikinis.

In closing, I want to make clear that I don't condone these kinds of reactions to secular culture; to explain is not to justify. But they are reactions to something, and it's no accident that the global arise of fundamentalist religion has taken place along with the globalization of a set of neoliberal values which no longer even knows how to distinguish the sacred from the profane.

Are saner, worthier reactions possible? I've been trying to sketch one. But the worldview I've been proposing only has a chance of success if it acknowledges, and takes on the forces arrayed against it, and I believe the most dangerous of these are not religious fundamentalists but market ones.